Madame Claire

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MADAME CLAIRE

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By

SUSAN ERTZ

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MADAME CLAIRE

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CHAPTER I

If you wish to be relieved from the worries of housekeeping; if you wish to cultivate the society of retired army folk, or that of blameless spinsterhood, ask for a room (inclusive terms) at the Kensington Park Hotel, Kensington. It is unprogressive, it is Early Victorian—though of late that term has lost some of its reproach—but it is eminently safe and respectable.

Although neither of these qualities had ever particularly attracted Lady Gregory—or Madame Claire, as her grandchildren called her—she found herself at the age of seventy a candidate for admission. It was out of the question for her to keep up the big house in Prince's Gardens after her only son Eric married. Live with him she would not, valuing his love for her and his own happiness too much to risk a ménage-à-trois with a daughter-in-law—even a daughter-in-law of whom at that time she approved. For Madame Claire not only faced facts squarely, but she had a way of seeing under and around them as well, which greatly endeared her to the more discriminating of her children and grandchildren.

It was eight years since Eric had married Louise Broughton, and eight years since Madame Claire had come to live at the Kensington Park Hotel. Her little suite was arranged with charming taste. Guests of the hotel were not encouraged to furnish their own rooms, but Madame Claire had succeeded little by little in ousting the hotel atrocities and had put in their place some favorite pieces left from the sale of the house in Prince's Gardens. Her meals were served in her sitting-room by Dawson, her elderly maid, and there too she held her little court. She had a great pity for other old ladies less fortunately placed, who were obliged to be in, yet not of, the homes of their children or grandchildren—"Always there, like pieces of furniture. Whereas," she would say, " if my family wish to see me they must come to me, and make an occasion of it."

A wonderful woman she was then at seventy-eight, with all her senses very much on the alert.

She read a great deal, but thought more, looking out of her windows at the world. She usually dressed in gray or dark blue, avoiding black which she said was only for the young. She was more nearly beautiful at seventy-eight than at any other period of her life, though she had always been a woman of great charm. She had been a loved and invaluable wife to the late Sir Robert Gregory, whom the world knew best as ambassador to Italy. She often said that for the connoisseur there were only two countries, England and Italy.

When Robert Gregory died, leaving her a widow of sixty, she was speedily—too speedily some said—sought in marriage by their lifelong friend, Stephen de Lisle. That was eighteen years ago. Refused by her, and perhaps made to feel just a little an old fool, he went abroad in one of his black tempers, and she had not heard one word from him since. It was a great sorrow to her, for both she and her husband had loved him devotedly. The grandchildren, especially Judy and Noel, thought it a delightful romance. They liked having a grandmother who had refused a famous man at sixty and broken his heart. But it was a subject on which she would permit no affectionate comment. It would have meant so much to her to have had him as a dear contemporary and friend.

One foggy morning in late December when the whole world seemed bounded by the thick yellow fog which pressed against her window panes, Dawson brought her a letter bearing a French stamp. She knew the handwriting at once, though it had been firmer in the old days. She read a few lines of it, then stopped and turned to her maid who was busy about the room.

"Dawson," said Madame Claire in a voice that was far from steady, "here's a letter from Mr. de Lisle."

"Oh, m'lady!" cried Dawson who loved surprises, "it's like a voice from the grave, isn't it now?"

"He's not well," continued her mistress, reading on. "Gout he says, poor old thing. He writes from Cannes, where he's gone for the sunshine. He has to have a nurse. How he must hate it!"

"And you as strong and well as ever," exulted Dawson. It was a source of peculiar joy to her when any of Madame Claire's contemporaries fell victims to the maladies of old age, or that severest malady of all, death. Her beloved mistress seemed to her then like the winner in a great race, and who was she, Dawson, but the groom who tended and groomed the racer? She thrilled with pride.

Madame Claire read the letter through to the end, and then went at once to her desk, with as free a step, Dawson thought, as she had ever had.

"I must write to him immediately," she said, a flush on her old cheeks.

The letter took her several hours to write, because there was so much to tell him. He kept it, as he kept all her letters, and when he died they came into Eric's possession, and finally into the writer's.

"My dear old Stephen," she wrote,

"Nothing that has happened to me in the last ten years has given me as much pleasure as your letter from Cannes. After a silence a fifth of a century long, you have come alive for me again. Stephen, Stephen! How am I to forgive you for that silence? But I do forgive you, as you knew I would, and I thank you for the happiness you have given me by breaking it.

"I don't believe you have changed much, though you say you are an invalid—gout, phlebitis, rheumatism! Infirm, crotchety old Stephen! Infirm as to legs, but very active, I gather, as to brain,

heart, and temper. How I wish we might see each other! But you cannot travel, and I—yes, I can, but I will not. I motor gently down to my little house in Sussex in the summer, and back again in the autumn, and that is enough. The rest of the time I dwell in peace and security in three rooms here at the Kensington Park Hotel, and it suits me very well.

"How good it is that we can pick up the threads of our friendship again! As far as I am concerned it has neither lapsed nor waned. You say I dealt you a great blow. But, Stephen, how could you expect Robert's widow, already a grandmother, to have married again? That, my dearest friend, would have been an elderly folly for which I would never have forgiven myself. You sulked badly, Stephen, and I think now you owe it to your years and mine to laugh. Do laugh! There is nothing like the mirth of old age, for old age knows why it laughs.

"You say you want me to write you about everything that concerns myself. I know you are only trying to cover up your tracks here, for the one you really want to hear about is Judy. I am well aware of your elderly partiality for my granddaughter, with whom you fell in love when she was seven—twenty years ago. But I don't

intend to pander to it at the expense of the others. Judy must take her turn along with the rest.

"Stephen, would you be young again? You, thinking of your gout and your phlebitis, would cry 'Yes!' But don't you see that you would merely be inviting gout and phlebitis again? For myself, the answer is no, no, no! And I have been happy, too, and with reason. Not for anything would I be blind again, uncertain, groping; feeling my way, wondering where my duty lay, dreading the blows of fate before they struck, valuing happiness too highly. That is life. Now the turmoil has died down, confusion is no more. It's like sitting on a quiet hilltop in the light of the setting sun. Fate cannot harm me—I have lived. There is nothing to be feared, and there is nothing to be expected except the kindly hand of death, and the opening of another door. Perhaps one is a little tired, but the climb, after all, was worth it, and one can think here, and listen to the cries of birds, and the sound of the wind in the grass. The lie of the land over which one has come takes on a different aspect and falls into a pattern. Those woods where one felt so lost—how little they were, and how many openings they had, if one had only gone forward, instead of rushing in blind circles. . . .

"Gordon, my tactless grandson, said the other day that no one would dream I was nearly eighty if it were not for the evidence of the family tree. That did not please me. I take as much pride in being nearly eighty as I once took in being sixteen. After all, being an old woman is my rôle at present, and naturally it is a rôle I wish to play well. Perhaps you'll say that I would accept old age less philosophically if I were blind, or deaf, or bedridden. I wonder? Even without all one's faculties, surely there are thoughts and memories enough to furnish the mind. (Why, why, Stephen, don't we cultivate CONTEMPLATION?) *And that tantalizing veil that shuts us off from the beyond should be wearing thin at our age, so that by watching and waiting one should be able to catch glimpses of what it hides.*

"And now you will say, 'For Heaven's sake stop moralizing and tell me about Judy.'

"I hate describing people—especially those I love, but I will try. She is lovely in her strange way, with moments of real beauty. I say strange, because she follows no accepted rules. She is somber, but lights up charmingly when she smiles. I suppose her mouth is too wide, but I like it. She is dark—the sort of girl who wears tawny colors well. She has brains and humor and in

responsiveness is not even second to Eric. Her mother, my daughter Millicent whom you will of course remember, is foolishly trying to goad her into marriage. How I pity youth! It's so vulnerable! Judy tells me she sometimes wakes at night in a sort of fever, hagridden by the thought that she may have made a mess of her life by not marrying this man or that, fearful that she may never meet the right one at all, hating the thought of spinsterhood, and, she says, seeing nothing else for it.

" 'What,' you may ask, 'are all the young men about?' Well, we lost many of our best in the war, as you and I know full well, and Judy expects—everything—And why not, as she has everything to give? She is not a girl to make concessions easily. Noel, her younger brother, is a great joy to her. Do you remember Noel, or can you only remember Judy? He was a dear little boy in those days, with his prickly, unusual notions, and his elfishness. He is not exactly good-looking, but his height, and his extremely attractive smile make him at least noticeable. He lost his left arm in France, and is now finding it very difficult to fit into a job. His health was so bad before the war that he had never settled down to anything, and the doctors had frightened him

and all of us into the belief that a severe winter cold would kill him. Then the war came, and three winters in the trenches made a new man of him.

"Gordon, of course, went back to the Foreign Office, where he seems perfectly happy. He will never fit his grandfather's shoes, however. Robert had more wit in his little finger than Gordon has in his handsome head—but it is a very handsome head.

"Do you know that I am practicing great self-restraint? I have hardly mentioned your godson Eric—for fear, perhaps, of saying too much. He was away at school when you were last here, so he must be a very shadowy figure to you. He might have been like a son to you all these years, if only you had not cut yourself adrift from us all. For five years, you say, you have been almost within a day's journey of England without once crossing the Channel. And yet time was when London was like a ball at your feet. Your great fault, Stephen, is that you take defeat badly. I still believe that you could have turned your political reverse at least into victory if you had stayed.

"At forty-one Eric is very like what Robert was at that age, but more dynamic. Keep that

word in mind if you would know him. He infuses life into me through his voice, through his smile, through his intensely blue eyes. He is impetuous and headlong—but headlong always on the side of fairness. He has his father's quick grasp of things. He is tremendously interested in what you say—in what he says—and in you. When he smiles he makes you smile, when he laughs you must laugh too. He treats me as if I were an interesting old friend whom he likes, as well as his mother whom he loves.

"His wife—he married Louise Broughton, the daughter of old Admiral Broughton—doesn't in the least understand him. If I have a regret in the world it is that. But I will tell you more about her another time.

"And now a few words about Millicent whom you knew as a sedate young matron. She is still sedate. She is in fact the very embodiment of all that is correct and conventional (I almost said and dull) in the English character. By that I mean that she is always well-poised and completely mistress of herself whether at Court or in her nightdress in an open boat. (Where indeed she was, poor thing, for she was torpedoed crossing from America during the war. She had gone there to raise funds for the Belgians. An eye-

witness told me she presided all the time, especially when it came to handing round the rum and biscuits. She was always a good, if stiff, hostess. He said that her nightdress, barely covered by a waterproof and a lifebelt, became by some miracle of deportment a quite proper and suitable garment, and made the women who were wrapped in furs look overdressed. I can imagine it perfectly.)

"I have never outgrown a feeling of amazement at having achieved anything as correct as Millicent. She is always certain she is right, and she never sees obstacles. When Gordon, Eric, and Noel went to the war she never worried, but looked quite calmly to their safe return, completely ignoring the awful and uncertain ground between. I believe she thought that the Almighty had a special mission to look after Pendletons and Gregorys. It seems she had some grounds for her belief, only Judy says she forgot to concentrate on Noel's arm.

"John, her husband, is as negligible as ever. I cannot think what you found in him to dislike, unless you, like Nature, abhor a vacuum.

"As for Connie—my poor Connie! Stephen, I don't know where she is, nor whether she's alive or dead.

"Get better of your gout and the other things, and come to England. After all, there is no place like it. Although we are in the midst of winter and coal is scarce and dear, and though the descendants of the daughters of the horseleech have multiplied exceedingly and cry louder than ever, 'Give, give, give!' And although even the children nowadays seem to lisp in grumbles, for the grumbles come, it is still the best country in the world and you must come back to it and take it to your heart again before—but you hate the thought of that, so I won't say the words.

"I will write again next week; there is so much to tell you. So good-bye, for now.

"CLAIRE."

CHAPTER II

DAWSON thought her mistress must have begun to write her "memoyers," she wrote so long. She said as much to Judy and Noel when they came to pay Madame Claire a visit the next day. They were much interested in the news. Judy remembered "Old Stephen," as she had called him years ago, and identified him by describing a mole that he had on one cheek. It was her first experience with moles, and for a long time after she confused that little mound on his face, with the bigger mounds the moles made in the lawn, and thought that a much smaller animal of the same species must have been to blame for it.

As a child she had an extraordinary memory—a memory that seemed to go beyond the things of this life. She came trailing clouds of glory in a way that used to alarm her mother and delight her grandmother. Millicent was quite shocked at a question of hers when she was four.

"Mummy, whose little girl was I before I was yours?"

Of course Millicent answered:

"Little silly, you've always been my little girl."

But Judy wouldn't hear of it, and shook her head till the curls flew.

When her grandmother questioned her about it, she would only repeat:

"It was another mummy under the big tree."

Millicent was convinced that she only said it to annoy.

Noel too had little peculiarities as a child. Loud music always hurt his eyes, he said, and when he heard a noisy brass band he would shut them tightly and cry out:

"It's hideous! It's so red. I hate that color."

He always saw color in music and heard music in color, and never knew that he was different from other people until he went to school, and there the boys teased him out of it. Think of the individual oddnesses that are strangled (for better or for worse) in school! Limbo must be full of childish conceits and strange gleams of knowledge.

On that particular afternoon the two of them amused their grandmother even more than usual. They had no secrets from Madame Claire, which of course is the greatest compliment the young can pay to the old.

The subject of Judy's spinsterhood was introduced by her brother. She had refused a friend of his a week before, and he pretended that the situation seriously alarmed him.

"There's not a man on the tapis at present," he told Madame Claire. "She's given poor old Pat Enderby his walking papers, and I'm hanged if I know what she's going to do now. There isn't even a nibble that I'm aware of."

"My dear boy," said Judy from the other end of the sofa, "I've got till I'm thirty-five. That's nearly eight years. If I don't find somebody by that time, I'll know I'm not intended for matrimony."

"Every woman is intended for matrimony," said her brother judicially.

"That's nonsense. And anyway," Judy defended herself, "I've no intention of rushing about looking for a husband. I'm quite content to stay single as long as I have you."

"Rot," said Noel unfeelingly. "I want a lot of nephews and nieces, and Gordon's would be such awful prigs."

"So might mine be," she retorted. "There's no telling, apparently. Who'd think that Mother was Madame Claire's daughter?"

"Well, if they were prigs, their Uncle Noel would soon knock it out of them. Besides, provided you don't marry a prig—which heaven forbid, there's no reason why they shouldn't be regular young devils."

"You seem to be well up in eugenics, Noel," observed Madame Claire, her eyes twinkling. She was sitting near the fire in an old chair with a high, carved back. She loved their nonsense, and liked to spur them on to greater absurdities.

"He thinks he is," Judy said. "But honestly, spinsterhood is fast losing its terrors for me. One ought to be proud of it, and put it after one's name, like an order of merit. I shall begin signing myself, 'Judy Pendleton, V.F.C.' Virgin From Choice. Doesn't it sound charming?"

"Horrible!" exclaimed Noel. "I certainly wouldn't advertise the fact. I think spinsterhood is awful. I believe I'd rather see you a lady of easy virtue than a spinster, Judy."

"Really, Noel!" cried Judy. "And before Madame Claire!"

"She doesn't mind," scoffed Noel. "Besides, she agrees with me. Don't you, Madame Claire?"

She appeared to consider the question.

"I think spinsterhood would be less dull, in the long run," she answered. "After all, no one is freer from ties—if that is a desirable thing—than the modern unmarried woman."

"Of course," Judy seconded her. "Noel's point of view is ridiculously young. Personally I could be quite content if I had some money of my own, freedom, and a few friends."

"Bosh," spoke man through the mouth of Noel. "If you mean to include men friends, let me tell you that men are afraid of unmarried women over thirty-five or so. They can't make them out. Neither fish, flesh, nor fowl."

Judy did not pretend to dislike men.

"That's rather a dreadful thought," said she.

Tea arrived at this point, and Noel proceeded to make absurd conversation with Dawson, who had known the brother and sister from babyhood. Absurd, at least, on his part, but perfectly serious on hers. She always asked him how his arm was, meaning, presumably, the place where they took it off.

"Splendid, thanks, Dawes," he replied. "They're going to give me a new one soon, I'm glad to say. They make wonderful artificial limbs now, that can do most anything."

"So they tell me, Mr. Noel," said Dawson, arranging the tea things.

"For instance," he went on, "the one I'm going to have knows all about raising chickens. It's trained specially. I'm thinking of going in for chicken farming, you know."

"Is that a fact, Mr. Noel?" breathed Dawson.

"Oh, yes," went on the deceiver of women. "You see, I don't know a thing about chickens, and all I'll have to do will be just to follow my arm about, so to speak. It can tell the age of a pullet to a day, just by pulling its leg. That's why they call a young hen a pullet, you know. As for eggs, it can find 'em anywhere. It doesn't matter how cleverly the old hens hide them, this arm of mine can smell 'em out as quick as winking."

Dawson gaped with astonishment.

"I never would have believed it, would you, m'lady?" exclaimed the dear old London-bred soul. "They do invent wonderful things these days, don't they now?"

"Oh, that's nothing," went on Noel mercilessly. "A chap I know lost both his legs in the war. He never was much of a sportsman, but he made up his mind he'd like to go in for golf. So they made him a specially trained pair of golf legs, and hang it all! the poor fellow has to play all day long now. The worst of it is he doesn't care much about it, now that he's had a taste of it. Bores him, he says. But those blessed legs of his, they take him off to the golf links rain or shine, every day of his life; and they won't let him off at nine holes, either. Has to play the whole blooming eighteen."

At this point, Dawson's slow mind gave birth to a faint suspicion.

"Now, Mr. Noel," she said, her plain old face red with one of her easy blushes, "I believe you're just having me on."

"Nothing of the sort," said he, looking the picture of earnest candor, "you haven't heard the half of it yet. Why, another chap I know had even worse luck than that. Nice fellow, too—has a wife and family. He lost his right arm. Well, they made a mistake with him and sent him an arm that was specially designed for another chap—a Colonel in the War Office—devil of a fellow and all that. Would you believe it, every time my friend went near a Wraf or a Waac, that arm of his nearly jumped out of its socket trying to get round the girl's waist? Awkward, wasn't it?"

Dawson's expression was almost too much for him.

"Don't look so cut up about it, Dawes," he said, reaching for a cake. "It all came out right in the end. He and the Colonel swapped arms, and so he got his own, finally. It was specially designed for spanking the kids, and as the Colonel was a bachelor it was no good to him. So they both lived happy ever after."

Dawson was on her way to the door. Before making her exit, she turned her crimson face toward Madame Claire.

"I do wish, m'lady," she said, "that you'd tell Mr. Noel there's some things that ought to be sacred. And I'll say this, Mr. Noel. The arm you want is one that'll pinch you when you tell fibs."

"Good old Dawes," commented Noel between mouthfuls. "She generally manages to get her own back."

Judy and Noel were much interested at this time in Eric's matrimonial affairs. Noel especially was convinced that he and Louise were on the verge of a smash-up.

"Something's got to happen," he said. "The tension in that house is too awful. Dining there is like sitting over a live bomb and counting the seconds."

"I can't think how Eric stands it," said Judy.

Madame Claire shook her head.

"There won't be an explosion. Nothing so dramatic. What I dread most isn't a smash-up, but a freezing-up. Like the Nortons', Judy. Do you remember how they avoided each other's eyes, and never laughed, nor even smiled? Their very faces became frozen. It was terrible."

"It would take a considerable frost to freeze Eric," Judy remarked with a laugh.

"Fortunately," assented her grandmother. "What I most admire about him is that he's always ready to discuss peace. He's always hoping for signs of friendliness from the enemy."

"She treats him like a red-headed stepson," Noel said indignantly. "If he'd only begun by beating her now and then——"

Madame Claire felt bound to make out a case for her daughter-in-law.

"She married the wrong man—for her—that's all," she said.

When Noel and Judy had gone, Madame Claire sat thinking about Eric and his unfortunate marriage. He was, as she had called him in her letter, dynamic. He was as impulsive and full of the love of life as his wife was joyless and cold. His chief charm lay in his perfectly sincere interest in everything and everybody. His mind was as elastic as his muscles, which were famous at Oxford, and while his wife found most things rather tedious, to him there was nothing old under the sun.

He thought he had married a charming girl, and indeed, for a while, she had charm. During his impetuous pursuit of her—for some instinct told her that the more she eluded him, the more eagerly he would pursue—she assumed a delicate sparkle that became her well. He could even remember a day when she threw out an alluring glow at which a hopeful lover might warm his hands, but it soon died, and the sparkle with it. Love may have told her how to spread the net, but of the cage in which to keep him she knew less than nothing.

Madame Claire understood better than any one else that he felt ties of the spirit far more than he felt ties of the flesh. That peculiarity he had inherited from her, for she had often been heard to say that she loved Eric because he was Eric and not because she had borne him. She declared that her affection for Judy and Noel was entirely due to their own charm and attraction for her, and had nothing to do with the fact that they were her grandchildren.

"Though I am very glad they were," she would say, "for in that way intimacy has been made easy for us."

With her daughter Millicent she had nothing in common but the blood tie, and though she rarely confessed it, there were times when it irked her.

And so her son found it impossible to be the conventional husband who takes his wife for granted. He never took Louise for granted for a single instant, and it shocked her. He treated her with the same courtesy and studied her moods as diligently as if she had been some one else's wife. When he made her a present, which he liked to do, he expected her to show the same pleasure in the gift that she would have shown before their marriage. As for her, she would have asked for nothing better than to settle down into the take-everything-for-granted matrimonial jog-trot. When the clergyman pronounced them man and wife, he said, so far as Louise was concerned, the last word on the subject. Spiritual marriage was an undreamt of thing. She expected her husband to be faithful to her and to look up to her, because, after all, she came of one of the oldest families in England. So they were rapidly growing apart. Threads had become twisted and lines of communication broken. And there seemed no good reason for it all. There was still a spark among the cooling embers, but some wind that was needed to blow upon it had shifted and gone elsewhere.

There were no children—which was a greater sorrow to Eric than to the empty-handed Louise.

"A figurehead of a wife," Judy called her, and it was true enough.

They lived in a charming house in Brook Street, which Louise complained wasn't big enough to entertain in, and was too big to say you couldn't entertain in. She had left the furnishing of it to Eric, admitting her own deficiency in the matter of taste. She bitterly resented his unerring instinct for the best thing and the right thing; a gift, she chose to maintain, it was unmanly to possess.

"I didn't know I was marrying a decorator," she was fond of saying.

CHAPTER III

STEPHEN DE LISLE's second letter, eagerly looked for by Madame Claire, came the following week.

"Dear Claire,

"Thank God for your letter. It's put new life into me; and I assure you, I needed it. Of course it's all tommyrot what you say about old age. Who wouldn't want to run and jump about again, and be able to digest anything, and sit up late at night? I think this having to be coddled and looked after is an infernal nuisance.

"Yes, I was a fool to take your refusal as I did, but that can't be helped now. You forgive me, and besides, I know well enough the loss was mine. But I couldn't have endured London all these years. Too many people, too much noise, and too much dirt. Still, I may, gout and rheumatism permitting, come to see you and my godson and the grandchildren yet. I'm glad you remembered how fond I was of that child Judy. Most attractive child I ever saw. Twenty-seven, you say? It doesn't seem possible. Don't let her get married in a hurry. She is perfectly right

to wait for the real thing. Instinct is the lead to follow, and hers is a right one.

"That was a wonderful letter of yours, Claire. I hope there will be many more. They give me something to look forward to. I haven't a half dozen young people about me as you have. I've one niece, Monica de Lisle. Ugly, churchy, uninteresting female. You may remember her.

"Cannes is delightful, but alas! I am too old to enjoy more than the sun and the color of the sky. How do you manage to keep so young in your mind? Bob used to say you'd die young if you lived to be a hundred, and he was right.

"I'm reading Shakespeare mostly. I find the old ones the best, and he's the best of the old ones. Omniscient, he was.

"Well, well, write again soon. Don't tire yourself, but—write soon. Do you remember old Jock Wetherby? He's here at this hotel. Tottering on the brink, and ten years my junior. Drink—women—all the cheapening vices. Looks it, too.

"Tell me about Judy and the others.

"Yours ever,

"STEPHEN."

"P.S.—I've got the ugliest nurse in Christendom."

Madame Claire read extracts from this letter to Judy, who was immensely pleased at the impression she must have made.

"Though what he saw in me, I can't think," she said. "My chief points, judging from photographs, were shoe-button eyes, a fringe, and a prominent stomach. But there's no accounting for these infatuations."

"I do wish he would come to London," said Madame Claire as she folded the letter. "After all, London is the best place for old people. They get more consideration here than anywhere else in the world."

The Kensington Park Hotel certainly harbored its share. On those rare occasions when Madame Claire took a meal in the dining-room she was always struck by the number of white, gray, or shining pink heads to be seen. And the faces that went with them were usually placid and content. In the lounge at tea-time they fought the war over again, they made or unmade political reputations, they discussed the food, the latest play, and most of all they discussed—the women at least—Royalty and the nobility. Not even in the drawing-rooms of the very great were exalted names so freely and intimately spoken of. One old dame with an ear trumpet, who later comes into the story, had once or twice, at Judy's or Noel's request, been invited into Madame Claire's sitting room. Noel called her the Semaphore. From her they learned what it was the Royal family had for breakfast the morning war was declared, or what Princess Mary said to young Lord B—— when he trod on her toe at a dance. How these stray bits of gossip or surmise ever filtered their way down the old lady's ear trumpet was a mystery to every one. She was an old woman of strange importance. She envied no one under Heaven. She possessed a small black instrument that seemed to be the focusing point of every fine wire of invention. She seemed to be the central office of the world's "They Say" bureau. No one was ever rude to her, and no one, except perhaps Madame Claire and her grandchildren, ever really disbelieved her, because hardly any one does altogether disbelieve rumors, even when they come from such a source. Her greatness of course was at its height during the war, when she was generously supplied with the most astounding pieces of secret information by obliging young nephews. However, she bore the flatness of peace with serenity, contenting herself with the doings of the great. Of such, with variations, is the kingdom of Kensington!

A day or two later Eric and Louise came together to see Madame Claire. It was so long since they had done this that she felt a little flutter of hope, believing that it indicated a better state of things between them. But she found soon enough that she was wrong. Louise was possessed—in the sense that people one reads of in the Bible were possessed—by her own special demon of jealousy.

She was not jealous of any other woman—it was far less simple than that. She was jealous of the ease with which her husband made friends, of his popularity, of his charm. They had been guests at a rather political house party, where Eric was unmistakably the center of attraction. She was aware that she had been more tolerated than liked, and the knowledge did not contribute to her peace of mind. She was determined to make him feel (on any grounds whatsoever) inferior to her. She could understand and respect superiority of birth, but she distrusted and resented superiority of intellect.

"A most successful week-end," Eric told his mother, drawing up a chair beside hers. "Their house is lovely, and I am very fond of them all. I should like to think that I am one-half as good a host as Charles Murray-Carstairs."

"I am glad you both enjoyed it," said Madame Claire.

"Both?" Her daughter-in-law gave a short laugh. "Candidly I was bored to tears."

Louise was meant to be a pretty woman, but having a regular profile and an English wild rose complexion, she relied upon them to pull her through, and wore her clothes as if she despised them. Her hair was never quite tidy at the nape of her neck, and her hats of this season were undistinguishable from those of two seasons ago. She took a pride in her lack of smartness, and had a curious and mysterious belief that it was both unladylike and unpatriotic to dress in the fashion. Although she was only thirty-four, her girlishness had gone so completely that it might never have existed. The thin nostrils and small tight mouth suggested the woman of fifty. She met Eric's eyes with a look of antagonism.

"I'll tell you what the visit was like, Madame Claire. We couldn't go out because of the rain, so Eric and Charles had time to ride all their hobbies. We had old plate for luncheon, cricket for tea, and politics for dinner. I don't know what we had for breakfast. I was spared that by not coming down."

"You see, mother," said Eric with a gesture of the hands, "the sufferings of a woman who is married to a bore. I know of no case more deserving of pity."

"It's always the same," went on his wife, "whenever we go away together. But there are always plenty of pretty women to hang upon his words, Madame Claire, so it really doesn't matter."

"Now there," interrupted Eric with a smile, "there you are wrong. Never in my life have enough pretty women hung upon my words to satisfy me. I should like to see hundreds of them so hanging, and the prettier the better. Inaccuracy," he added, turning to his mother, "is one of Louise's greatest faults."

"Well, Louise," said Madame Claire, putting a hand in one of Eric's, "time was when you led and others followed. You never used to be shy. If you were bored with politics and old silver——"

"I'm not shy," her daughter-in-law answered. "I think subjugated would be nearer the mark."

Eric took this up humorously.

"I have subjugated Louise," he said with mock pride. "I'm willing to wager that no other man could have done it under fifteen years, and it has taken me only eight. And I've never once used the whip. Simply and solely the power of the eye. I subjugate all my wives," he added. "I am a terrible fellow."

He picked up and examined an old spoon that lay on Madame Claire's table, and was about to change the subject, when his wife's cold voice interrupted him.

"Oh, I don't claim that you're any worse than the general run of husbands."

"Thank you, my dear. I can only suppose that you took one to yourself in a moment of weakness." Then, throwing off his annoyance:

"What a charming spoon! It's Charles the Second. You've never shown me this."

"Judy gave it to me the other day," said Madame Claire, her face brightening. "She's very clever at picking up these things. But then—who taught her?"

"Ah, well, you can't teach everybody," he answered, turning it over in his fingers.

"You can't, for instance, teach your wife," threw in Louise. "But there's one thing I have learnt since my marriage, Madame Claire, and that is my limitations."

"You underrate yourself, Louise," said Madame Claire calmly. "Do tell me about Gordon.

Noel and Judy believe he's really interested in Helen Dane. Do you think he is?"

"He's there a great deal," answered Eric, "but then that may mean nothing. Ottway, her father, is a good sort, but pompous."

"Lord Ottway has dignity, if that's what you mean," said Louise. "I hope Gordon does marry Helen. It would be very suitable."

"As for suitable—I don't know," said Madame Claire, musingly. "The girl seems a little hard—self-sufficient. Still, I don't dislike her."

"I only wish Judy would do as well," Louise went on. "She's almost certain to throw herself away on some nobody."

"If he were a nice nobody I shouldn't mind," said Madame Claire.

When Louise got up to go, Madame Claire followed her into the bedroom where her fur coat was. She longed to say something to her. She felt that the words existed that might soften that bitter mood, but she could not find the right ones. She was sick at heart with anxiety. She knew that Eric's patience was at breaking point, and that he found his wife's sarcasm hard to bear. Louise had only lately resorted to sarcasm—that passing bell of love—and yet, underneath it all, Madame Claire felt that she loved him, and longed to be different, but that something—some strange twist in her nature—would not let her. She seemed to her like a woman pushing her frail boat farther and farther out into a dangerous current, and all the time crying weakly and piteously for help. She doubted if that cry reached any ears but hers.

"I am the only one who can help her," she thought, and at the same time sent up a prayer to the god who understands women—if such there be.

A few days later she sent Louise a note, asking her to come and see her.

"If I can only avoid being mother-in-lawish," she thought, "I may be able to accomplish something."

Louise found her sitting in her high-backed chair beside a wood fire. The room was full of the scent of freesias, and she wore a few of them in the front of her gray dress.

When Louise had put aside her wraps, Madame Claire began to say what she had to say without any unnecessary preliminaries.

"Louise, I particularly wanted a talk with you to-day. I hope you'll be very frank with me, as I mean to be very frank with you."

"I think you'll always find me quite willing to be frank," replied the younger woman.

"Very well then. Perhaps you'll tell me this. Is Eric doing everything he possibly can to make you happy?"

Louise raised her eyebrows.

"What an odd question! Yes, I suppose he is—as well as he knows how. Why?"

"Because it isn't hard to see that you're not happy, and it makes me very sad."

"I suppose people do notice it," said Louise. "I can't help that. I'm not happy."

"Just what I thought. Well, can you tell me the cause of it? Eric has succeeded in a good many things, and I don't like to see him make a failure of his marriage."

"I suppose not."

"You two ought to be happy. You have everything; you married for love, presumably. I'm sure you've done your part. It must be Eric's fault in some way."

Louise began pulling off her gloves, her chin suddenly trembling like that of a child who is about to cry.

"It's nobody's fault, I suppose. We're simply not suited to each other. Eric should have had a wife who'd be willing to sit at his feet all day long, and tell him how wonderful he is. A sort of echo."

"Are you sure that would please him? And suppose it did—after all——"

"No!" she said with determination. "There are plenty of other people to tell him what fine speeches he makes, and how clever he is. I'm not going to be one of them. He'll hear the truth from his wife, whether he likes it or not."

"So you don't think he makes good speeches?" persisted Madame Claire gently.

"I dare say he does, but——"

"I thought you said he would hear the truth from you. If he does make a good speech, I should think he'd love to hear you say so. If you do believe in him and in his ability, Louise, I wish you would let him know it. I don't believe you have any idea how much it would mean to him."

Louise got up and walked to the window.

"I have his ability and his cleverness thrown at me by his admirers year in and year out," she said. "I'm sick to death of it."

"And are you the only one who never encourages or praises him?" asked Madame Claire. "A man must find that rather bitter."

Louise turned from the window with an abrupt movement.

"I wish him to know that he can't have admiration and flattery from every one. It will be the ruination of him."

"Ah! I thought so. So it's really for his good?"

"Well, as I promised to be frank, no; I don't suppose it is. But I can't help it. Things have always been made too easy for him. Why should he be such a darling of the gods? Life isn't easy and pleasant for me. Why should it be for him?"

"I see." Madame Claire laughed suddenly. "Forgive me, Louise, but there's something rather funny in it."

"In what?"

"In your wanting to be a sort of hair shirt. Oh, dear me, I don't know why I laughed. Only, my dear, there's so very little happiness in the world. I'd forgotten there were good people going about trampling on it."

There was a moment's silence.

"I think I'd better go away for a while," said Louise finally.

"Do!" urged Madame Claire. "It would be an excellent thing for both of you. Stay away from Eric long enough to be glad to see him when you get back."

"If I were," said Louise, "I'd never give him the satisfaction of knowing it."

Madame Claire called once more on the deity who understands women.

"And yet, Louise," she said, with all her courage, "you love him. You love Eric. I know you do. Some day you may find out how much, and it may be too late. That will be the tragedy. You'll know that you had only to reach out your hand—you're like a child, you know. Have you ever seen a child while playing with other children, receive some fancied slight, and withdraw, hurt? I have. The other children don't even know what the trouble is, and they go on with their game. The hurt child stands apart, lonely and miserable. They call her presently to come and join them, and she longs to go, but can't—*can't!* Something won't let her. Oh, I know, I know! I must have been that child once. I know what she feels. She stands there kicking at a stone, longing, yes, longing to go out into the sunshine again and play. She knows that game better than they do. They even call to her to come and lead them. But she can't. She sulks. She doesn't want to sulk. She suffers. And then the nurse comes, and the play is over, and she is taken off to bed. It is too late. It is finished. . . .

Louise! You stupid child! Isn't it something like that? Tell me, isn't it?"

Madame Claire's finger had found the spot, evidently. Louise's hardness, her bravado, suddenly left her. Madame Claire had never seen her cry before, and the sight seemed to her very pitiful. Her tears made her seem younger.

"It is like that." Her voice came muffled from the handkerchief she was pressing to her face. "But I'm helpless. I can't be different. I tell you I can't. The more Eric tries to be nice to me, the more I harden toward him. The more I want to meet him half way, the less I'm able to. I'm not hard, really; I long to be different. But it's too late. It's grown on me now. I can't stop it. I suppose I must go on like this forever. My life is a misery to me."

* * * * * *

It was a prayer of thanksgiving that went up to the god who understands women that night. Madame Claire felt that now all things were possible. Where there had been a blank wall, there was now an open gate—for her, at least. How long it would be before the gate would be open to Eric, she dared not think.

CHAPTER IV

"My dear Stephen,

"I was delighted with your letter. I believe you are feeling better, for you sounded far more like your old self. Especially the postscript, which I thought a most hopeful indication.

"Yes, I remember old Jock Wetherby. Poor old thing! How perfectly ghastly to approach the end of one's life as a mere elderly libertine. For I feel there is very little else one could truthfully carve on his tombstone. And what a commentary on free will! He once had gifts and opportunities such as are given to few.

"Last night I went with Judy and Noel to see that enchanting sprite Karsavina. I shall never forget it. As a rule one watches people dance, but last night I danced too. I swear that my spirit left its rheumatic old body and sprang and whirled and darted in the midst of all that color and movement with the music splashing and rippling about it. For a few hours I bathed in the Fountain of Youth—that fountain whose waters, I believe, are made up of music, color, and some

other ingredients that man with his slow mind has not yet discovered. Certainly I was never less conscious of flesh and bones.

"And why is it, I ask myself, that only certain combinations of sound and color can produce this effect, or give this measure of delight? Suppose, one day, some one were to hit upon the utmost perfection in arrangement of sound, color and form, would it open up a straight path like a shaft of light for our spirits to glide upon into some other world than this? For I feel we are very near that other world when our senses are so stirred and lifted up by beauty. I wonder! But perhaps there is already perfect beauty in the world, and it is only that our spirits lack the necessary freedom from earthly things—or why should we not drift into Paradise itself upon the perfume of a rose?

"At the moment my mind is very full not of Paradise but of Eric and Louise. She has decided to go and stay with her people in Norfolk for a while, where, I fear, she will continue to be unhappy. Things had come to a dangerous pass with them, and Eric is as sore and puzzled as a man can be. Hers is a strange nature. I have tried hard to find a chink in the armor of her bitterness. Poor Louise! And yet I believe she

would go to the stake vowing she had been a good wife to him. There are a great many women, I find, who think that if they neither leave nor deceive their husbands they are being good wives to them. I pray that something—God knows what!—will happen, to make a change of attitude easy for her. She would have been happy, poor girl, with a dull fellow to whom she could have condescended.

"I often say to myself, Stephen, that to realize the imperfection of our relation to God, it is only necessary to realize the imperfection of our relation to one another.

"I have made a discovery of late. At least I think it is a discovery. This is it. I believe that while the majority of men are content to be merely themselves, the majority of women are busy playing some rôle or other that takes their fancy or that circumstances suggest. I think that most women are forever conscious of an audience. I shall never forget a girl I once knew—she would be a very old woman now—who pretended to have lost her lover in the Crimean War. I knew—for she made me her confidante—that it was a quite imaginary lover, and that she had invented him to make people think her inconsolable, instead of unsought, as was actually the case. So for years

she played the rôle of a bereaved woman, and if she is alive she is playing it yet. Every word, every action was suited to the part, and eventually she must of course have come to believe it herself. When she talked to a girl about to be married or in love, there was always a trembling smile upon her lips, and the brightness in her eye (as the novelists say) of unshed tears.

" 'Ah, my dear, treasure your happiness. I pray you may be more fortunate than I was.'

"And youth knew her for a woman with a sad, romantic story.

" 'A liar, pure and simple,' you may say. Not at all. Merely an actress playing her part.

"Take the case of Louise—a weak nature overshadowed by a stronger one. What does she do? Creates a rôle for herself—the rôle of a patient, slighted woman, married to a selfish and exacting man. Why? Seen under the microscope we might discover it to be an attempt to attract notice.

"Take the case of my dear Judy. Most of her friends are married. She, being very fastidious, and finding that falling in love is at present quite beyond her, creates a little rôle for herself—the rôle of a very modern, independent girl who finds that sort of love unnecessary to her happiness.

"Then there is Millicent. She too is playing a part, though she would be horrified if I told her so. Hers is to be as much as possible like her surroundings, and to imitate as closely as she can the other women of her set. She has become as conventional and as harmlessly snobbish as they. At heart she is a kindly creature, but since marrying her John she has disguised herself so well as a Pendleton that if I had not a good memory for faces I would find it hard to distinguish her from all the other Pendletons.

"And then there was Connie—poor Connie! Her rôle was that of a woman of great emotions, of devastating loves—a sort of Camille. But underneath it I imagine and hope is still the simple, credulous woman who looked for happiness where happiness was not.

" 'And,' perhaps you'll ask, 'don't men make rôles for themselves?' Rarely; and when they do they are insufferable.

"I am very tired and must stop. Tell me who else is at Cannes.

"Accept my affectionate greetings,

"CLAIRE."

"P.S.—You tell me nothing of your life all these years."

* * * * * *

Time never seemed to Madame Claire to pass slowly, but it had never passed less slowly than now. Stephen de Lisle's letters undoubtedly added a spice of excitement and anticipation to her days. She seldom went out (for she disliked fog, and London seemed just then to have gone to bed with a thick yellow blanket pulled over it) and she only asked those people to come to see her who, she said, touched her at the most points. She hated polite boredoms, and unless her visitors pleased or amused her, she preferred to be left to her own thoughts.

Of late her mind had run much upon her youngest daughter Connie, the beauty of the family—Connie who had "thrown her bonnet over the mill," as the saying was in those days, and run off with Petrovitch, who was at that time first capturing London and Paris with his marvelous playing.

The blow had nearly broken her father, but Madame Claire was made of sterner stuff, and had long observed tendencies in her lovely daughter which promised to lead to this very dénouement. Connie Gregory had one of those entirely beautiful faces which seem so at variance with the tragedies they evoke. She had the prettiest and weakest mouth, and the most irresistible blue eyes that ever gave delight to a painter of pretty women. And she was "done" by all the fashionable artists of the day in every imaginable style of dress and posture. She had a very small share of wit, but with women like Connie, a little wit goes a long way. Her lovely head was forever turning to look down dark paths, and no one but her mother ever observed those sidelong glances. When she was twenty-two, she married a perfectly suitable young man, and Madame Claire hoped that the then serious duties of wifehood and motherhood would fill her shallow little head to the exclusion of dark romancing. But they had been married less than a year when Petrovitch with his leonine head and his matchless playing became the rage of London, and Connie, in company with a good many other women of her type, threw her youth and beauty, like a bouquet of flowers, at his feet. He was able to resist much, but the sheer loveliness of Connie made such an onslaught upon his bored indifference—wherein was mingled the most astonishing conceit—that when his contracts in London expired, he returned to Paris with the emotional and hysterical young wife clinging to his arm.

It was just at the outbreak of the Boer War, and Leonard Humphries, her husband, very naturally seized the opportunity of getting himself honorably shot. When that event took place, as it did some months later, people thought that Connie would at least legalize her irregular attachment by marriage, but Petrovitch produced a sturdy German wife, and scotched all such hopes. So London saw the lovely Connie no more.

Madame Claire bore her trouble with all the philosophy at her disposal. She never tried to avoid the subject, and was quite as willing to talk about Connie as about Eric or Millicent, in the wise belief that wounds exposed to the air now and then have the best chance of healing. For years after she sent letters and often money to Connie through her banker, for she knew well enough where a lack of funds might lead those uncertain steps. For a while her letters were answered, but it was not long before the answers ceased to come. She had heard nothing from Connie for many years now, and she no longer expected to hear. She thought of her as a foolish and unhappy woman, whose punishment would be, here or hereafter, self-inflicted, and understanding human nature as she did, she refrained from bitterness.

As for Eric, he was of the opinion that the world suffers less on the whole from women who love not wisely but too well, than from women who love too little. Weighed in the perhaps faulty scales of a man's judgment, therefore, Connie was a better woman than Louise. Connie gave all and got nothing, while Louise took all without a thank you, and gave nothing. But men are always more inclined to forgive the generous sins than the ungenerous.

CHAPTER V

"OLD STEPHEN'S" letter in answer to Madame Claire's second one, contained a great deal that was of interest to her.

"Dear Claire,

"I didn't answer your last as promptly as I wanted to because of the ills of the flesh. However, I feel freer of them to-day than I have for some time past. Your letters get better and better. I wish I could write like you. I've no gifts. I thought once I had a gift for politics. Well, perhaps I had, but I hadn't the gift of pleasing—for long. I offended the Great Cham of my day, and after that it was like going down a greased slide. But better men than I have set their feet upon it. I had my say, and I paid for it, and I'd say it again if the chance came.

"You want me to tell you something of my life all these years. Well, here is an outline for you. After I left England I was in the United States for five years. A country gloriously endowed by nature, but somewhat spoilt by man. I like Amer-

icans individually; I number several of them among my few friends, but I'm not sure I like them as a race. They're not a race—that's the trouble—but they will be some day. There's little racial breeding at present. As for characteristics, if you find them in the South, you lose them again in the East or West. You know more or less how an Englishman or a Frenchman's going to act, because, exceptions excluded, they run pretty true to form. But you can't guess how an American's going to act until you know whether he's Irish, German, British or Scandinavian American. Which complicates matters.

"Then I was five years in South America—three of them in Peru which I grew to love. After that—let me see—two in Burmah, one in Ceylon, and the last five in sunny spots in France and Italy—a sad spectator of war. I've enjoyed my travels. I have, I hope, learned much. But I can't write about it. I'm no good at that. Can't think how I used to write speeches once—and deliver them. I suppose living alone all these years has made me inarticulate. Miss McPherson's afraid of me, I believe. Silly little thing. That annoys me.

"You ask me who else is in Cannes. I'm not sure I ought to tell you, but knowing you as I do,

I think you'd want to be told. Connie's here—with a man of course—and stopping at this hotel. Miss McPherson wheels me about in a chair on my goodish days, and I came upon them suddenly in the grounds this morning. Connie passed by without speaking, but I'm certain she knew me. She looks the unhappiest woman on God's earth. Later I sent Miss McPherson to make inquiries, and it seems they call themselves Count and Countess Chiozzi. They may be for all I know. At any rate, he looks a dirty little cad. I'll try to speak to her, for I think you would like me to. I will leave this letter open for a day or two, in case I do.

"Next day.

"I spoke to her to-day in the garden. She was alone. I said, 'Connie, don't you know me?' She went a queer color, I thought, and said, 'Yes, you're Mr. de Lisle.' I said, 'You knew me yesterday,' and she admitted it. I was in my bath-chair (beastly thing!) and I sent Miss McPherson away. Then I said, 'Well, Connie, I see you're the Countess Chiozzi now. Are you in Cannes for the winter?' She said she supposed she was; that Cannes did as well as another place. She asked me if I'd been in England lately, and when I said, 'Not in twenty years,' she exclaimed,

'Then you don't know whether——' and stopped. I knew what she wanted to ask, and said, 'Yes, Connie, she's alive and well, thank God. I heard from her only five days ago.' She sat down on a bench, and we talked for some time. She was evidently wondering how much I knew, so I put her at her ease by saying I knew all about it, and I was afraid she was having a pretty rotten time. She started to flare up at that, but thought better of it, and said, 'I am. Chiozzi is a devil. I must get away from him somehow. I'm at the end of my endurance.' She went on to tell me about her life, and the gist of it is this. I'll tell it in as few words as possible. She has always loved Petrovitch, she says, and no one else. He was in love with her for a time, then tired of her, as she interfered with his work. She wrote to her husband, asking him to take her back, but before he could reply a bullet took his life at Spion Kop. A year or two later she met a French officer who fell in love with her. They were to have been married, but he found out about Petrovitch and left her. Connie said bitterly that his life had been what many men's lives are, but she wasn't good enough. After that she went to Rome where she met an American named Freeman. She married him, and they sailed for New York on

the 'Titanic.' He was drowned, but she reached New York without so much as a wetting. She tired of New York, returned to Paris, and there met Chiozzi. They were married about four years ago. She says he is evil incarnate; but then women like Connie haven't much choice. I asked her if I might tell you all this, and she said I might, and also sent you her love, but said she couldn't possibly write to you herself at present. She still loves that poltroon Petrovitch, and would go around the world to see him, I believe. She ought to leave Chiozzi, that much is certain. I can see she fears him as much as she hates him.

"What a lot of people chuck away their lives in learning that passion's a boglantern! The thing that stands chiefly in the way of human progress is the fact that we've each got to find things out for ourselves. Women found out what Connie's finding out (I hope) two thousand years ago. Does that help Connie forward? Not a whit.

"I can't write more now.

"God bless you!

"STEPHEN."

The next day, Madame Claire read the letter to Judy, who was keenly interested.

"Aunt Connie has always seemed rather a fabulous creature—a sort of myth—to me," she said. "I can't quite realize her. Would you like me to go to Cannes and fetch both her and 'Old Stephen' home?"

Madame Claire thought not.

"It's very odd you should have had three children so entirely different," said Judy. "They all had exactly the same environment and the same care. How on earth do you account for these things?"

"I don't," replied her grandmother. "I can merely suppose that they all require different experiences; and they're certainly getting them." Her eyes rested on Judy in her brown dress and furs, and on her face with its challenging dark eyes and the too wide mouth that she loved. She wondered what experiences would be hers. Not Connie's; and even more surely, not Millicent's. So far her life had been even and tranquil—too tranquil for her own liking. She wanted to live. She had a great deal to give to life—and so far she had not lived at all.

"I suppose, like every one else," went on Madame Claire, "they are working out something—I don't know what. After all, my children are just people. So many mothers think of their own children as apart from the rest of the world. I don't. Connie, Eric, Millicent—just people."

"Eric isn't," protested Judy. "Eric is one of the gods come to earth again."

Madame Claire laughed.

"Not Apollo!" she said. "I never liked his profile."

"No, not Apollo. A youngish sort of Jove, but without his skittishness, or his thunders."

"I know what you mean. There is something simple and Greek about Eric. It's nice of you to see it."

"It's a great pity he's my uncle," remarked Judy. "Do you know, your daughter Millicent has been extremely troublesome lately? I wish you'd speak to her about it. It isn't only the marriage topic. She wants me to pattern myself after the tiresome daughters of her most tiresome friends. You know the sort of girls I mean. They come out in droves each year, and play tennis in droves, and get married in droves, and have offspring in droves, and get buried beside their forefathers in droves. It's so dull. I hate doing things in droves."

This amused Madame Claire.

"Individualists have rather a bad time of it in your mother's particular set," she said. "Of course even I want you to marry, because I think you'd be happier in the long run; but not until you find some one you can't do without."

"I have a sort of presentiment," Judy told her, flushing, "that if I ever do marry it will be some one undesirable. That is," she hastened to explain, "undesirable from mother's point of view."

"But not necessarily from mine?" inquired Madame Claire.

"Not necessarily," returned Judy.

She walked from the hotel to the house in Eaton Square where the Pendletons had lived ever since Noel was born, feeling that the world was a very blank sort of place at the moment. Having done vigorous war work for nearly five years, she was missing it more than she knew. Millicent could and did respond to the call of patriotism, and had seen her sons go forth to war like a Spartan mother; but why her only daughter should continue to do work long after the coming of peace, and when she had a comfortable home, social duties and flowers to arrange, was more than she could understand. So Judy, weary of argument, stayed at home, paid calls and arranged flowers. She felt something of an impostor, too, telling herself that she had cost her parents a great deal, and they were not getting their money's worth. She had been educated and given an attractive polish for one purpose—to attract and wed a suitable man of a like education and polish. Being honest to the backbone she was distressed about it. She had not fulfilled her side of the contract, and her parents had, to the best of their belief, more than fulfilled theirs.

She avoided the drawing-room where there was tea and chatter, and hurried to her room, which Noel called "The Nunnery," because of its austere simplicity. The white walls, quaint bits of furniture, and stiff little bed suggested the sixteenth century. The rest of the house was Millicent's affair, and was "done" every few years in the prevailing mode by a well-known firm of decorators.

Noel wandered into her room soon after she reached it, and while she took off her hat and coat, he sat on the foot of the bed, which, if any one else had done it, would have seriously annoyed her.

"How's Claire?" he asked.

"Wonderful as ever. She's got more common sense, Noel, than the rest of the family put together. What do you think? She's heard about Aunt Connie, through 'Old Stephen.' He saw her in Cannes."

"Connie?" He whistled his astonishment. "The erring aunt! What's she doing in Cannes?"

"She seems to have married some awful bounder, fairly recently. A Count Somebody. And she's fearfully unhappy."

"Why doesn't she come home? Afraid of public opinion, and mother?"

"Well—can you wonder? She has no friends left, I suppose. It must be pretty awful for her. Of course you'll say she's made her own bed——"

"On the contrary, I wasn't going to say anything so trite. What do you take me for? I'd trot her round like anything if she came here. It isn't everybody who's got a beautiful, notorious aunt."

"I'm rather curious to see her," admitted Judy. "Though I don't suppose we'd like her particularly. She must be rather a fool to do what she did."

"She couldn't help it," Noel defended her. "If you're a certain type—well, you just are that type, and you act accordingly. That's what she did."

"Nonsense, Noel," protested Judy. "That's a useless, easy sort of philosophy. According to that, no one can help anything they do."

"No more they can, if they're the sort of people who do that sort of thing. When they get over being that sort of people they'll act differently, but not before."

"That's a hair-splitting sort of argument," said Judy.

"Any more than you can help being a spinster," he explained, developing his theory. "Being the spinster type, you act accordingly. When you pull yourself together and make up your mind to be another type, you'll cease to be a spinster. But not before."

Judy sat down, facing him. It always amused her to discuss herself with Noel.

"Am I the spinster type?" she asked.

"Well, aren't you? It's fairly obvious. Look at this room! . . ."

"My dear boy," she retorted, "I'd have a room like this if I had ten husbands—or even lovers, for that matter. You'll have to do better than that. How else am I the spinster type, apart from my room?"

"You're a spinster in your mind," he asserted. "You think celibately."

"Oh, now you're being too ridiculous!" she scoffed.

He crossed his long legs and lit a cigarette.

"My dear girl, you don't understand thought. What you think, you are."

"You think you're a second Solomon," said his sister, "but you're not."

"No." He shook his head. "I disagree. I am entirely modern in my thoughts. I don't wish to be anything else. I'm not like Eric. Eric thinks we have had the best. I think we are always having the best. But to return to you."

"Yes, do return to me. I didn't mean to cause a digression. How can I stop being the spinster type?"

"By not hemming yourself in so much. You surround your femininity with barbed-wire entanglements."

"Really? They don't seem to have kept Pat Enderby out, and some others I could mention."

"They never got in. That's what I complain of."

"Oh, but my dear Noel—you surely don't think I'm going to turn myself into a sort of vampire just to please you? Not that I couldn't—I'm almost certain I could. . . ."

"I never meant that. You willfully misunderstand me. Vampires are all very well on the screen, or on some paving stone in Leicester Square, but they don't go in our sort of life. No man would willingly marry one."

"They don't on the screen," she said. "They always marry the little thing with curls and the baby smile. Is that what you'd like me to be? Because I honestly don't think that's my type either."

"I find arguing with women very trying," observed Noel. "They always drag in unessentials, and dangle them before your eyes as if they were main issues. Even you do it. As for mother——"

"Never mind. Let's get back to the main issues. I am the main issue—or my spinsterhood. What do you want me to do, exactly?"

"Simply this. I want you to cut the barbed-wire entanglements and come out into the open now and then. Men aren't wild animals, after all. They're only human beings."

Judy suddenly decided to drop nonsense.

"Do you know why I keep inside the barbed wire?"

"No. Why?"

"Because any man that I meet in this house has been asked here in the hope that I'll find him marriageable. And so the fairest—the only decent thing I can do is to let him know as soon as possible that I'm not in the market, so to speak. If he's a fairly good sort and seems to find me at all interesting, I—well, I put up more barbed wire. Of course I oughtn't to mind, but it's all so obvious. I hate it. It was different with Pat. I liked him, and besides, he was your friend . . . but even then . . ."

"I think girls do have a rotten time of it," agreed Noel.

"It's made me self-conscious," she went on. "This business of matrimony always in the air. As it is, I wouldn't raise a finger to attract any man."

"Not even the right one?"

"Least of all the right one."

Noel got up and stretched himself.

"Well, old dear," he said, "I'll make a prophecy. When you meet the right man—hateful phrase—you'll cut the entanglements, climb the barricades, and give yourself up to the enemy. That is, if I know anything of my sister Judy."

"You don't. But you're an old darling just the same. Are you in or out to-night?"

"Out. Dining at the club with Gordon. His show! But I'm coming home early. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I'm dining with the Bennetts, and they usually send me home in the Heavenly Chariot, so I think I may as well pick you up at the club."

"Do. I'll amuse myself somehow till you come."

"About ten-thirty or eleven," she told him. "And be on the look-out."

"Right-o." He walked to the door and then turned. "And think over what I've said, old girl."

CHAPTER VI

The "Heavenly Chariot" was Judy's name for the Bennetts' shining gray car. The Pendletons had one of their own, an elderly and dignified Daimler, but for some reason unfathomable by the younger members of the family, it was never allowed out at night, when it was most wanted. Millicent thought that Forbes, the old chauffeur and ex-coachman, required his evenings to himself, and as Forbes had never been known to object to this arrangement, it stood, and the family relied on taxis, or the underground.

So that Judy was feeling uncommonly luxurious close on eleven that night, when the beautiful gray nose of the Heavenly Chariot thrust its way through the fog that had shut London from the sky for three days past. She loved the movement, the mystery of the dark streets, the soft menace of the fog.

"This is the very essence of London," she thought.

They turned into Pall Mall, and she was sorry to think that the perfect motion would cease in a moment. What happened next, happened with such amazing suddenness that in three seconds it became a problem already to be reckoned with, a situation to be met as best one could.

They had knocked some one down in the fog. An instant before she had been reveling in that smooth slipping along—almost the annihilation of friction—and now, between the ticks of a clock, some one, because of this inconsequential little journey of theirs, was robbed of health perhaps, or life. While her mind was struggling to accept a fact so hateful, her feet had taken her to the front of the car almost before the chauffeur had brought it to a standstill. Their victim had clung to that long gray nose—clung for an instant and then gone down. Another man was bending over him, drawing him gently into the pool of radiance their lights made.

"Chip!" the other man was saying. "Chip, old man, are you badly hurt?"

There was no answer. Judy put her arm under the limp man's shoulder, and they raised him up. He stood swaying between them.

"Take him to the car," she said.

A constable (who seemed nebulous all but his buttons, which the light caught) loomed up out of the blackness, and demanded names and addresses. Mills, the chauffeur, seemed unable to cope with the disaster, which he considered had come upon them ready-made, out of the night.

"It was my friend's fault entirely," said the other man. "He started to cross without looking."

"Can't be too careful a night like this," remarked the constable, making entries in his notebook.

The victim suddenly straightened himself and said in a thick voice, "I'm perfectly all right." Then he became limp again.

It was at this moment that Noel arrived, having been keeping a look-out, as instructed by Judy. The wail of metal-studded tires being brought to a sudden stop had attracted his notice, and he came out to see what was up. The constable, observing his empty sleeve, addressed him as Captain, and things began to progress. Like many another policeman who has to do with street crossings, this one considered women biological absurdities. Mills and the victim's friend got "Chip" into the car and made him as comfortable as possible. Noel sat outside with Mills, and Judy sat beside the injured man, overcoming an almost uncontrollable impulse to draw that bending head down to her shoulder.

For the belief had come to her, at the moment when she saw Chip's white face in the glare from their lamps, that they had chosen the nicest man in all London to knock down.

His friend, who sat sideways in one of the small seats, introduced himself as Major Stroud, and the victim, on whom he kept an anxious eye, as Major Crosby.

"He'll be all right as soon as we get him home and to bed," he assured Judy. "It's too bad, but you're not in any way to blame. Saw the whole thing, so I know. Crosby's always walking into things. He's everlastingly thinking about that book of his. I tried to grab his arm, but it was too late."

"How badly do you think he's hurt?" She could hear the injured man's laborious breathing, and was heartsick.

"Oh, just a knock on the head, I expect, against that curb. Thank Heaven it was no worse. Your chauffeur did splendidly. Can't think how he avoided running over him."

"But a knock on the head may mean——"

"Now don't you worry about it, Miss——"

"Pendleton," Judy said.

"Miss Pendleton. I'll ring up the doctor as soon as we get to his rooms. He's pretty tough —aren't you, Chip old man?"

He put an affectionate hand on his friend's knee. At that moment Chip swayed suddenly toward Judy's fur-wrapped shoulder.

"Better let me sit there, Miss Pendleton," suggested Major Stroud. "He's no light weight."

"It's all right," said Judy. "I was a V.A.D. for years." She slipped her hand down to his wrist and felt his pulse. "Why do you say he's always thinking about his book? What book?"

"Oh, Chip's a writer, you see. He's always writing something. Just now it's a book on religions. Queer hobby for a fighting chap, isn't it?"

The car sang its way up Campden Hill while Judy listened to what Major Stroud had to say about his friend. He was evidently devoted to him. When they stopped at last, purring softly before a narrow house in a narrow turning off Church Street, she felt she knew more about the two of them than she did about many people she had known far longer.

"Make short work of things now," said the Major in his brisk way as he got out. "Come along, Chip old man."

Very gently he and Mills lifted him out, and carried him into the house and up three flights of excessively dark and narrow stairs, while Judy and Noel followed behind. They had to pause once or twice as the weight and length of their burden made getting round corners very difficult.

"I'm going to wait till the doctor comes," said Noel. "Hadn't you better go home in the car now, Judy?"

"Why should I?" she demanded. "Can't I wait too? I dare say I can help. Noel, isn't it ghastly?"

"I like Chip," said Noel. "It's funny, but I did the moment I saw him. Didn't you?"

Judy nodded, unable to say much. Her throat ached, and she knew she was not very far from tears. It was so grotesque and unreal, that they should have caused this unnecessary suffering.

Major Stroud telephoned to the doctor, and Mills went to fetch him, as being the quickest way. Meanwhile Noel and the Major got Chip into bed.

Judy, left to herself, explored the little flat. She lit a gas-ring in the tiny kitchenette and put a kettle on. Then she found a small store of brandy which she brought out in case it was wanted. As she busied herself getting ready things the doctor might ask for she made herself well acquainted with Chip's home. The sitting room possessed two solidly comfortable chairs and a sofa, all covered in brown linen. There was a gate-legged table, two etchings by Rops, and a vast number of books on religious subjects. Except for the books and the etchings it was as impersonal a room as a man could have. It touched her, it was so—she searched for a word—so starved.

"Man cannot live by books alone, my poor Chip," she thought. She seemed to see again the kindly, tired lines about his mouth and eyes. She imagined a lonely life for him, with Major Stroud as the only close human tie. They had been through two campaigns together, the latter had told her. Fancy calling the Great War a campaign! She smiled at the thought. A hard-bitten man, the Major. She supposed the two were about of an age—say, forty-three. Bachelors? Oh, undoubtedly.

Then the doctor arrived—a cheerful, bustling man with a short gray beard. He seemed to have known the two of them for years.

"I helped to bring this young man into the world," he told Judy, clapping an affectionate hand on the Major's solid shoulder. That gentleman, who didn't look as though he could possibly have needed help on that or any other occasion, smiled a little sheepishly, and then the bedroom door closed upon them. Noel and Judy, left in unhappy suspense in the sitting room looked at one another.

"Why couldn't you have knocked down some drunken rotter?" asked Noel, walking about the room with his hand in his pocket. "Why pick out Chip?"

Strange how the name had made itself at home with both of them!

"Why? Oh, Noel, I can't bear it to be true! Haven't we dreamt it all? If anything happens to him——"

"If only there are no beastly consequences," said Noel, frowning, "you may have done everybody a good turn in the end. I mean—he seems such a decent sort—I like him. And I think he might like us."

Judy nodded.

"But I'm afraid it's concussion, Noel."

"It may be only very slight. Well, we'll know in a few minutes. There was a terrible bump on his forehead, but we couldn't find any other marks."

"Suppose we'd killed him!" It wasn't like Judy to suppose ghastly possibilities. "If I hadn't gone to the club to pick you up," she mused, "if I'd gone straight home, it wouldn't have happened."

"Oh, hush, Judy! What's the good of all that? Look here"—he paused in front of her—"Chip evidently isn't well off. I intend to arrange with the doctor, about bills. So you back me up, won't you?"

"Of course. I'd thought of that too. And Noel——"

"Well?"

"Let's keep this to ourselves. I'd much rather not tell the family anything about it. Wouldn't you?"

"Much. It's our affair."

"I've hardly spent any of my allowance lately. We'll go halves about the bills. . . . Don't even tell Gordon, will you?"

"Gordon? He's about the last person I'd tell."

Here the doctor returned, followed by Major Stroud. They closed the bedroom door softly.

"Nothing to worry about," the doctor told them cheerfully, in that hearty voice common to the medical profession. "A man might come off worse in the hunting field any day, and no one make a fuss about it. Slight concussion and bruises, and that's all, young lady."

"Well, it's quite enough," said she. "I hate concussions. And there really are no bones broken? You're not trying to spare our feelings?"

"Word of honor as a father of seven. You can come and see your victim with your own eyes in a day or two. Major Stroud will spend the night here on the sofa, and the nurse will be on hand in the morning, if she's wanted. So now, Miss Juggernaut, you may roll home with a peaceful mind."

"You've cheered us up a lot, sir," said Noel, shaking hands with him.

Major Stroud took them to the door, after writing down their telephone number on a pad that the methodical Chip had hanging over his desk.

"You'll tell him, when he comes to, how sorry we are, and how . . . how anxious?"

But the Major shook his head at her.

"I'll leave that to you," he said as they parted. "He'll get the devil of a talking to from me—careless beggar."

They gave the news to the waiting Mills, and drove home with little talk. When Judy reached the door of her room, she kissed Noel good night.

"I'm glad we decided not to tell any one," she whispered. "Mother would look him up in *Who's Who.* It would be horrible."

"What about Claire?"

"Oh, we can tell her, of course."

CHAPTER VII

Madame Claire was glad she was not included in the ban of silence. She was much interested in the affair. She was also—though she took care not to let Judy see it—a little excited. It was not, she felt, one of those incidents that seem to have no consequences, nor leave any mark. Something new, she believed, had been set in motion, and that something new meant to poke a disturbing finger into Judy's life. But she forbore to ask too many questions.

She heard about it the next day, and Judy told her that Noel had already talked to Major Stroud over the telephone, and had learned that Major Crosby was still unconscious.

"He told Noel we were not to worry—the doctor's orders I believe—and then he went on to say that he'd once been unconscious for twenty-eight hours himself, and had come to at the end of it as lively as a cricket. But then he's a hopeless optimist, and you never can believe optimists."

"You and Noel seem to have taken him to your hearts from the first," commented Madame

Claire. "Chip, I mean. Well, I'd back your judgments against anybody's."

"I think you would have felt like that too. But he isn't going to be easy to know," said her granddaughter.

"Isn't he? Why?"

"He's very shy," answered Judy. "He had the shyest rooms I ever saw. Not a photograph to be seen, nor an ornament, nor even a novel. You know, you can guess at such a lot if there are things like that about to help you. No, there wasn't a single clue. But the greatest clue, in a way, was the lack of clues. As though, because of his shyness, he had tried to cover up his tracks. I don't think he wants to be known."

"If he had to be knocked down by a motor," said Madame Claire, "I consider it a fortunate thing that you were in it. After all, it might have been any Tom or Dick—or Miss Tom or Dick."

"I only wish he might take that view of it," answered Judy. "What news of Louise?"

Madame Claire hoped to hear more about Chip, but she was always quick to feel when a change of subject was wanted.

"She's with her people in Norfolk. She wrote Eric that she was enjoying the change, but that she felt it was her duty to come back at the end of the week. Of course Eric wrote to her that she wasn't to think of him, but that she must stay as long as she felt inclined."

"How that must have annoyed her! For what she wanted was to come home as a martyr before she was ready. What a woman! Don't you think it a miracle that Eric doesn't fall in love with some one else?"

Madame Claire shook her head.

"I doubt if he ever will. He finds consolation in his friends, and in his books, and in his work of course. Eric isn't a man who falls in love easily. And besides, I can't help thinking that he still has hopes of Louise."

"You think he still loves her?"

"Louise is his wife," answered Madame Claire, "and I believe that it hurts Eric intolerably to feel that the one person in the world who should be nearest to him, and who should understand him the best, deliberately keeps aloof. He feels he has failed—and Eric hates failure."

"If he has failed, it isn't his fault," said Judy. "It isn't for lack of trying. If he'd been just a nonentity she'd have enjoyed condescending to him. As long as he is what he is—sought-after and charming—she'll be what she is—jealous and bitter. I don't see how he stands it."

"Like Eric," Madame Claire said gently, "I can't help hoping."

A day or two later, Judy found her reading a letter from Old Stephen.

"There's a good deal about Connie," she told her. "Isn't it odd the way she seems to be coming into our lives again? Here's what he says:

"'*And now a few words about Connie and her Count. I've talked to him several times, and he's like some poisonous thing in a stagnant pond. I do wish you could persuade her to leave him, for he insults and humiliates her at every turn. She confessed to me yesterday what I already suspected—that he had gambled away most of his money and much of hers at Monte Carlo, and that he is constantly demanding more. I think it would be advisable for Eric to come here if he possibly can. She is frightened, and her nerves are on edge. I suppose he threatens her, poor woman. What do you think ought to be done?*' "

"He stopped there," said Madame Claire, "and finished the letter next day. I'll read you the rest.

"'*I was interrupted yesterday by Miss McPherson, who wouldn't let me write more. So I* *left the letter open, and I'm glad I did, for there's a sequel. Connie left here this morning for Paris, without a word to anybody. I thought she would have written me a letter to say good-bye, but she hasn't. I don't know what brought matters to this head, but I suspect it had something to do with Mademoiselle Pauline, the dancer, with whom the Count has been spending much of his time, and more, I imagine, of his money. Miss McPherson, who has her human side, has taken a considerable interest in Connie's affairs, and tells me she is sure there was a scene of some sort last night. However that may be, Connie has gone. They told me at the office that she went to Paris, but left no forwarding address. Well, my dear Claire, I fear all this will distress you, but you have a brave heart, and would wish to know. If you have any idea where Connie would be likely to have gone, to what friends or to what hotel, I cannot help thinking it would be wise to send Eric to look for her. I say this because she seemed to me a desperately unhappy woman.'*

"That's all about that," said Madame Claire, putting the letter away.

"What do you think ought to be done?" Judy asked her.

"Eric is coming here to-night, and I'll talk it over with him. If he can spare the time to go to Paris, I think it would be a good thing."

"But if he doesn't know where she is?"

"I think I can guess," answered her grandmother. "Years ago, before the children were grown up, we used to go and stay at a little private hotel off the Avenue de la Grande Armée. In the autumn I recommended it to a friend of your mother's, and she was delighted with it. Judging from her description, I don't think it can have changed much. She told me that the granddaughter of the old Madame Peritôt remembered me perfectly and said that Connie, whom she described as 'la belle Madame,' often went there when she wished to be quiet. I feel sure she would wish to be quiet now, and I believe that if Eric goes there he will find her."

"Do you want him to bring her to London?" inquired Judy.

"I think I had better leave that to him," answered Madame Claire.

* * * * * *

Eric went to Paris the day following. He had no idea, when he left, whether he would try to persuade Connie to come back to London or not. He would decide that when he had seen her. Nor did he explain matters to Louise, to whom the very name of his once beautiful sister was anathema. He sent her a wire, however, which said merely, "Called out of town for few days. Probably back Monday."

He had been working very hard, and welcomed a change of scene. He had not been out of England since serving with his regiment in France, and later in Italy, from which campaign he was invalided home shortly before the Armistice. He was now member for a London borough, having given up soldiering for politics. His rather disconcerting honesty and policy of no compromise won him more friends in the former calling than in the latter, and though he had enthusiastic friends he had equally whole-hearted enemies, among whom he began to fear he must number his wife.

The thought of a lifelong companionship with a woman who disliked, or seemed to dislike his every attribute, appalled him. He had a way of reducing problems to their simplest form, and being a clear thinker, saw facts in all their nakedness. Louise was his wife. He had tried to make her happy. She either liked him or she did not. If she did not like him, why live with him? And if she did like him, why not show that she did?

It came to that. Other women liked him. Why could not his wife? He had never tried to please any other woman as he had tried to please her. The thing was an enigma. They could have had such delightful times together, for they had everything—health, youth, money, friends. Her coldness was inexplicable. She was not only cold to him, but to all men, and to most women. If she had cared for any one else he would have found a way to release her. He tried to put it out of his mind on the journey to Paris, and thought instead of Connie. He had been so proud of her beauty in the old days. He remembered her at dances, surrounded by respectfully admiring young men. How she had queened it for a while! And then —Petrovitch!

From Calais he shared a compartment with a rather charming woman with whom he fell easily into talk. He had a gift of nonsense which, when he cared to use it, most people—his wife of course excepted—found irresistible. So they sparred pleasantly till the train neared Paris. But in the end she struck a too personal note, talking about herself and her affairs with an astonishing lack of reserve, whereupon he liked her less. When they separated she gave him her address, but he forgot both it and her. She never forgot him. If he had liked her more they would have parted friends, or on the way to friendship, which would have annoyed Louise, who only made friends with people she had known or known of for years. But her candor was without simplicity, and her impulsiveness not without calculation, so she passed out of his life, for he was fastidious about women.

CHAPTER VIII

ERIC drove at once to the little hotel off the Avenue de la Grande Armée, and made himself known. He had wired for a room at the Crillon, preferring not to stay too near Connie lest he should find her surrounded by sympathetic friends. He dreaded her friends.

The granddaughter of old Madame Peritôt, a pleasant-faced woman named Le Blanc, gave him a cordial welcome, asked immediately after Madame Claire and then told him in answer to his question that Madame la Comtesse was resting, but would undoubtedly see her brother. Who indeed, she thought, would not be glad to see such a brother—a brother with such delightful manners, whose blue eyes—Ciel! Madame Le Blanc was enchanted by the blueness of his eyes.

Eric waited in the little salon, remembering incidents of their extremely happy childhood. Madame Claire had so often brought the three of them there, during vacations. They had nearly always come to Paris en route for the coast of Brittany or Normandy when the Roman summers became unbearable. He remembered how he and Connie, an exquisite, long-legged child of fifteen, had knocked over and broken a Dresden group during a scrimmage. They had secretly substituted for it another almost exactly like the first, except that the dress of the shepherdess which had been blue with pink flowers, was now pink with blue flowers. There it stood, just where their guilty hands had placed it, so many years ago, and he could not resist taking it off the mantelpiece and examining it. It was one of old Madame Peritôt's most prized possessions, and how they laughed when they realized that she had never noticed the difference! It might easily have met the fate just then of its unlucky predecessor, for he nearly dropped it, so suddenly and quietly did Connie enter—and such a Connie!

It was characteristic of Eric that he never said anything suitable to occasions. He kissed her cheek, and then said, holding her at arm's length and looking at her:

"You must come and dine with me. What do you say to a sole and a broiled chicken somewhere?"

But Connie felt that something more was due to the situation, so she clung to his arm and found —or seemed to find—speech difficult.

"Eric! Is it really you? My God! After all these years! Oh, Eric!"

"Nearly twenty, isn't it? And thirty or more since we broke the Dresden group there. Go and put your hat on. What a pretty dress!"

"You like it?" She turned about with something of her old grace and coquetry. "You were always quick to notice nice things. But how did you know where to find me, and why did you come? This seems like a dream to me. And you're still so good-looking!"

"Thank you, my dear. No one has ever told me that. It is charming of you. I came to see you. Mother guessed you would be here. And now go and put on your hat, for I'm very hungry."

"In a moment. I want to look at you. . . . I'd almost forgotten I had a brother. But how did you know I was in Paris at all? That meddlesome old Stephen de Lisle, I suppose, bless him!" Then her beautiful voice deepened. "Eric, I've got very old, haven't I? Tell me the truth."

Eric told it in his own way.

"I'm afraid I never think about age," he said, "so it's no good asking me. I think you look worried. Come, we'll dine early. There's a great deal to talk about. And don't change. I like you in that."

"I won't be long." She went to the door and then turned. "I'm being taken out to dinner by my own brother," she said softly. "You make me feel quite—respectable, Eric."

Her last words hurt him. If there had been any one with him he would have said as she left the room:

"Good God! The pity of it!"

It wasn't age he meant. He cared as little for that as most intelligent men. Connie had lost her youth. That was to be expected. But she had never gained its far more interesting successor, character. It was that he missed. She was spiritually, mentally and morally down at the heel. Her face was a weary mask, her yellow hair had known the uses of peroxide as well as of adversity, and her blue eyes, paler than her brother's, looked out, without expression, from a rim of carelessly darkened lashes. The frank vulgarity of her scarlet lips revolted him.

"All that," he said to himself, "to win a—Chiozzi!" He had hurried her off to get her hat because he couldn't bear to talk to her in that room of childish memories. It brought back to him too clearly the girl of fifteen, with her exquisite, sparkling face, her laughter, and that mane of fine golden hair that people in the streets too often turned to stare at. . . . He meant to help her, he had come to help her—but how to go about it? That he must leave to the inspiration of the moment.

When she returned, handsomely furred and too youthfully hatted, he gave her another kindly kiss to encourage her—for he could see that she was really moved—and took her arm as they went to the door. An old woman in another salon across the hall had observed their movements with the keenest interest. She carried an ear trumpet, but thanked Heaven that her eyes were as good as ever. Good enough to distinguish the paint on that woman's cheeks—which had not prevented Mr. Gregory from kissing her. Lady Gregory's only son! She knew he had married the youngest daughter of old Admiral Broughton, a great friend of the late King's. He had once been heard to say to him at a garden party—it must have been in 1907— There, they are getting into a cab together. He has taken her hand—off they go! Dear, dear! How very distressing! Poor Lady Gregory, and poor neglected wife! It wasn't as if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. And she hadn't lived in this wicked old world for sixty-nine years—even though most of them had been spent in Kensington—without knowing a *demi-mondaine* when she saw one. Odd she was to see Miss Thomkinson, a cousin of the Broughtons, the very next day. No, shocked as she was at the presence of such a woman in that house, she preferred not to speak to Madame le Blanc about it. It didn't go to enter into arguments with these French people, and besides, her vocabulary wasn't equal to it.

In the cab, Eric said gently:

"Well, Connie, my dear, I've come to help you in any way that I can, and to take you back to England with me if you wish to go. I gather that your marriage is anything but happy. Tell me about it."

Connie tried to speak but her efforts ended in a sudden burst of tears. She sobbed openly and unbecomingly. Eric, his eyes full of pain and concern, held her hand and looked out of the window at the once familiar streets. She had lived on her emotions for so long that self-control, he supposed, was utterly beyond her now. It was true that she had cried whenever she had felt inclined, during the whole of her unhappy, stormy life. But she usually cried for a purpose. This was different. Something, probably the amazing matter-of-factness of her brother, had touched the springs of her self-pity. At one step he had spanned all that had happened in the last twenty years. He was so entirely unchanged, while she —his eyes were as clear as ever, his fitness obvious at a glance, and his face scarcely lined. He represented all that she had lost, all that was sane and clean and wholesome. He reminded her of childish cricket, and nursery teas, and days on the river, and May Week, and clean young men in flannels. She had not met a man of his type since she had left her husband. She loved the faint scent of lavender that lingered in the fresh folds of the handkerchief he presently offered her. She wondered if it would be possible for her to go back with him, into the well-ordered life that he and his kind led, away from the shoddy women who had been her companions for years and the men who were rotten to the core.

"It has been a shock to you," Eric said. "I should have warned you."

She shook her head. It wasn't that. What it was she didn't feel capable of telling him now.

She wiped her eyes and cheeks recklessly with his handkerchief. Her make-up was ruined, and for the moment she didn't care, but presently at the sight of the well-filled restaurant she pulled herself together, and while Eric ordered dinner she busied herself repairing her haggard mask. No matter how badly Connie was looking, people always observed that she was a woman who had once been very beautiful. She joined him at the table in a few minutes, looking as though tears were as foreign to her nature as to a statue's.

It is characteristic of Connie's sort that they forget they have made a scene two minutes after it is over, and imagine that others forget as easily. She glanced about the crowded room as she sat down, hoping that she might be seen in the company of such a man. She was proud of him, and, to do her justice, proud of the fact that they were brother and sister, forgetting that in twenty years a resemblance that had once been remarkable had nearly vanished.

Before dinner was over, she had given him an outline of her life down to the present with commendable honesty. She had no wish, apparently, to gild the ugly sordidness of some of it, though she made it appear that her misfortunes had come to her more through the faithlessness and selfishness of men than through her own weakness. And yet men, it was obvious, were still her chief interest in life. As she talked to Eric her glance often wandered, and she made much play with her still beautiful hands.

Her dread of Chiozzi and his treatment of her seemed to Eric the most important part of her story. It was that he had to deal with now. She said he had threatened her life more than once in order to extort money from her. Her income had dwindled to barely seven hundred a year, all that remained of the considerable fortune left her by Morton Freeman. That much she had managed to keep intact, in spite of the efforts of her greedy Count.

"If I go back to him," she said with a shudder, "he'll have it all."

Eric dreaded the idea of a divorce. Her affairs had already had so much unsavory publicity.

"You must not think of going back to him at present," he told her. "Later we will see what can be done. You can write to him from London, if you wish."

"I dread London."

"You will be safest there. And you will find that people have forgotten. You must try to begin again, my dear, and be content with contentment, and simple things. You will not find life exciting, but you may find it pleasant. I will do what I can, and you will have mother, who is a marvel of marvels. I would suggest a little house in the country, or a small flat in town."

She considered this, smoking a faintly perfumed cigarette.

"What are Millicent's children like?"

"They're delightful. You'll love Judy and Noel."

"But Millie won't let them know me."

"I doubt if Millie will have very much to say in the matter. If they choose to know you, they will."

"And your wife—Louise?"

He hesitated.

"You may find her difficult."

"How difficult? One of those . . . those good women, I suppose." This with a sneer that made Eric wince.

"Louise is very . . . indifferent. Frankly, she doesn't care a straw for me."

"Not care for you? She must be a fool."

He inclined his head in the slightest of bows.

"You are my sister, and prejudiced."

"I know a man when I see one, whether he's my brother or not." She gave a short laugh. "Mon Dieu! I ought to, by this time."

"My wife," said Eric, "considers me a tiresome and conceited fellow. She dislikes a great many things about me; no doubt with reason."

"Jealous," commented his sister, who could see through other women.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"So some of my friends say. I cannot understand it. But you needn't see much of each other."

"I think I know her sort," said Connie, watching the smoke from her cigarette. "Well, we both seem to have made a mess of things."

This struck Eric as humorous, but not a sign of his amusement appeared in his face.

"Where is Petrovitch now?" he asked her.

She smiled to a passing acquaintance before she answered.

"In America, I believe. Still lionized and applauded. It seems to me, Eric, that men have nine lives to a woman's one. Look at me . . . a worn-out wreck, while he——"

"A bad fellow, Connie," said Eric; at which she bit her lip.

"I can't let you say that. I love him."

"Still?"

She nodded.

Eric looked at her as though he would like to see into her mind.

"Tell me this. I ask you as I might ask any woman in your place. Has it been worth it?"

Her eyes fell, and she seemed to be groping for words. Then she rose from the table, gathering up her long gloves and beaded bag.

"I would tell you, if I knew," she said at last. "But I don't know. I suppose I have lost all sense of values."

"That is answer enough," he replied.

* * * * * *

As they drove back to the hotel she turned to him and said:

"When do you want me to be ready?"

"I ought to go back to-morrow," he told her. "Would that be possible for you?"

"Yes." Then, a little dramatically, "I place myself in your hands, Eric. Do with me what you will."

CHAPTER IX

It was just a week after the accident that Judy and Noel went to Campden Hill to see Major Crosby. A message had come at last from Dr. Ferguson to the effect that if Miss Juggernaut and her brother cared to see their victim, they might do so between three and five that afternoon.

Major Stroud had rung them up almost daily, and Noel had found it difficult to account to the family for the sudden interest taken in him by some one they had never heard of before. For it was a household in which reticence was frowned upon and discouraged. Only Gordon, being the eldest son, was permitted to go and come without explanations. He was naturally secretive, and on the few occasions when he was pleased to give an account of his doings, his mother listened to him with something very like reverence. So Major Stroud became "a fellow at my club," which, as it chanced, he was, and Millicent gave up the attempt to penetrate further.

Judy had never felt as shy as on that Wednesday afternoon in the middle of January. She and

Noel rode up Campden Hill on a bus, and walked briskly, for it was a bitter day, from Church Street to Chip's rooms.

On the way up the stairs she said:

"Don't leave me to do all the talking, Noel. I feel idiotically nervous. I don't know what to talk about."

"Chuck maidenly modesty to the winds for once," he advised, "and talk about the weather."

"You're not very helpful."

"And when you've done with the weather, there's always the climate."

"Thank you."

"What I mean is, why not just be natural? I expect he's safely unmarriageable, from the money point of view. So you can let the barbed wire alone."

"Anyhow," she said thankfully, "Major Stroud will be there, and he's always noisy and cheerful."

He was there, and at their knock admitted them, looking very large and out of place in the narrow hall. He was one of those men who seem to belong astride a high, bony horse, or in the solid armchair of a spacious London club. He shook hands with great heartiness, and led the way to the sitting room with a loud and reassuring tread.

"Visitors, Chip, old man," he announced, and flung open the door.

Chip was lying stretched out on the sofa, pillows behind his head and a striped rug across his knees. His quiet manner of welcoming them seemed to Judy to contrast almost humorously with his friend's bluff cheeriness.

He had a nervous little speech all ready for them.

"I'm ashamed," he said, "to be the cause of all this bother. It's most awfully good of you to come. You'll forgive my not getting up, won't you? I'm not allowed to, for some reason."

"I should hope not," said Noel, as they shook hands.

"As for being a bother," Judy told him, "that's the sort of thing invalids say when they know they're not strong enough to be shaken. Major Crosby, I can't—I can't tell you how sorry we are." She hurried on, fearful of showing emotion. "Let's not say any more about that part of it. You know what we feel. . . ."

"And after all," put in Major Stroud, after the manner of Major Strouds, "accidents will happen, ye know, and as I tell Chip, he simply barged into you."

"Well," said Judy, "it's silly, both sides saying it's their fault. But there are two good things about it. The doctor says you'll soon be all right again, and—well, if it hadn't been for what happened that night, we'd never have met, would we?"

"That's a good effort, Judy," Noel encouraged her. "I second everything you've said. But let's cut out speeches now."

They all laughed, and after that it was easier to talk.

Major Stroud monopolized Noel, to whom he seemed to have taken a great fancy, and Judy found herself cut off from the other two, in a chair beside the sofa. For there is no room so small that a party of four cannot quite easily split up into twos.

Major Crosby looked much as Judy had expected him to look. That first sight of his face in the light from the car's lamps was, she knew, one of those mind pictures that refuse to fade. She was uncertain about the color of his eyes, which now proved to be gray, and though they smiled and had a habit of smiling as the lines about them showed, there were other lines about the forehead that spoke of anxiety. His hair was of that fine and unreliable quality that abandons its owner early in life, and Chip was already a little thin about the top. His long legs under the rug displayed pointed knees, and he moved his thin, well-shaped hands nervously.

"If I can only put him at his ease with me!" thought Judy.

They talked commonplaces at first, and then, stretching out her hand, she said:

"May I see what you were reading?"

He picked up a finely bound book that lay beside him on the rug, and gave it to her.

"I don't know why it is," he said, smiling, "but one always feels slightly apologetic when discovered reading poetry."

It was *The Spirit of Man,* and Judy was conscious of a feeling of satisfaction. They liked the same books, then.

"It's a dear friend," she said.

"Really? I'm glad of that."

"I didn't see this," she went on, "when I was prowling about the room the other night. For I did prowl, I admit it, and I found nothing but books on religion. You see I had to do something while I was waiting for the verdict."

"I expect it was in my room," he explained. "When the book I'm working on gets the better of me, or when I'm tired of it, I turn to that."

"You're very wise." She put the book on a table. "Now tell me about your own book. Major Stroud spoke of it the other night, and seemed to think it was to blame for the accident."

He laughed.

"He thinks it's to blame for everything. It's very dull, I'm afraid. It's about religions. They're my hobby. Not religion; religions. There's a difference, you see. I've tried to write a book that . . . well, how shall I explain it? . . . pulls them all together. Brings out their similarities. Fuses them, so to speak. It's tremendously interesting work and means a lot of research, and I like that."

"How long have you been working on it?"

"Oh . . . not very long. Let me see. . . . I started it in 1910. Twelve years. Well, I suppose that is a fairly long time. But you see the war interrupted things."

"There were four years when I suppose you did no work on it at all."

"I managed to get in a lot of reading. I was studying Druidism when I was in the trenches—most absorbing study. That was when things were fairly peaceful, of course. And when they weren't peaceful, one was . . . well, testing various beliefs, if you know what I mean. When there was heavy shelling, for instance, and you had to sit tight."

She smiled at him.

"Is it nearly done?"

"Well, the bulk of it's done, but I'm always adding things to it. You see I want it to be a sort of book of reference. If you want to find out where Mohammedanism resembles Buddhism you turn to where the two things are compared, belief by belief. But all this is very boring for you."

"It isn't. I like it. Don't you think it's extraordinary, with all the guidance that it has, that mankind goes so frightfully astray?"

"I suppose it is. But I always think that we expect too much of our fellow man. He's all right. Only give him time. He's got such a lot to unlearn."

"You mean he has all his brutal beginnings to forget?"

He nodded.

"I imagine I see him evoluting all the way from brute to angel, or something like it. He's about at Half Way House now, I think. Wars, of course, give him a bit of a setback."

"I suppose they do."

"Oh, rather! I'm sure they do. Not necessarily for every individual, you understand, but for the mass. I hate guns and noise and warfare like the majority of my kind. I always have and I always shall. But at the same time, when there's a fight on I've got to be there, and if there's going to be a top dog, I want my fellows to be it. Half Way House, you see!"

"And you think we'll get beyond it?"

"I don't doubt it for a moment. Do you?"

"I don't know. I always think that mankind looks its best under the microscope, so to speak, and that it's rather horrible when you see it in the mass."

"Like mold?" he suggested. "Ferns and flowers and lovely shapes when you magnify it, but very nasty indeed when you look at it on a damp wall."

"Yes. Just like that."

Her eyes smiled back at his eyes. It was at this moment that something greater than interest awoke in her. She knew it was there; she was aware of the very instant of its coming, and she meant, later, to examine it at her leisure.

Noel and Major Stroud were engaged in studying a map of the Somme, and were oblivious to them.

"You really must meet my grandmother, Lady

Gregory—or Madame Claire, as Noel and I call her. She's the most wonderful person. When you're better you must come and have tea with us at her hotel."

"I should like that very much," he said. "I get on quite well with old ladies. I find young ones rather alarming nowadays, but perhaps it's because I don't see much of them."

Judy laughed at this.

"Do I alarm you?" she challenged him.

"No," he admitted. "It's very odd, but you don't."

"What a blessing! Shy people—and I am one—usually have the most devastating effect on other shy people. But you'll love Madame Claire. She looks on the world from a kind of Olympus."

"Yet most of us dread growing old," he remarked.

"Yes. Isn't it ridiculous? But I don't. There are times when I envy her her age, and her . . . imperviousness. What a word!"

"It's temperamental, that sort of thing. It's the people who are always seeking gayety that dread old age most. Being Scotch I like grayness, and austere hills, and quiet and mystery. All old things."

Chip was surprised at the ease with which he could talk about himself. He felt half apologetic and looked at Judy as if to say, "Forgive me, but it must be some spell that you have cast upon me. . . ." A look passed between them then that was to both of them an unforgettable thing.

Their words had meant nothing, but they were mutually aware of a bond—a thing as fine as gossamer, and as strong as London Bridge. Judy was conscious of a queer little electric thrill that she felt to the very tips of her fingers. Their look had so plainly said:

"You and I. . . . We are going to be something to each other. What will that something be?"

To cover the nakedness of that question that each was aware of in the mind of the other, Judy turned away her head.

"Noel," she said, raising her voice, "Major Crosby and Major Stroud must come to tea at Madame Claire's one day. Can't we decide on an afternoon now?"

"Being one of the unemployed," Noel answered cheerfully, "all afternoons are alike to me. When will they let you up again, Major Crosby?"

"Oh," he said, "in three or four days I expect to be carrying on as usual."

They decided on the following Thursday, provided Madame Claire had no other engagement, and soon Noel and Judy, for fear of tiring their victim, got up to go.

"But you'll come and see me again, won't you?" asked Chip, then added, "but dash it all, I forgot! I'll be up soon."

They laughed, and his regret that they might not come again was so real that Judy said as they shook hands:

"Don't forget; Madame Claire's on Thursday, at four."

Major Stroud went out with them, leaving Chip looking after them rather wistfully.

Talking to her had been strangely easy as he lay there. It might never be the same again. He had looked at her to his heart's content, a thing he wouldn't have dared to do had they been talking in the ordinary way. His recollections of the accident were very confused. He had been conscious of some one at intervals—a sort of delightful presence. Major Stroud had filled in the rest for him—badly enough. The Major did not excel in word pictures.

Was she pretty . . . beautiful? He searched for the right word. She was lovely, that was it . . . lovely. She had taken off her gloves and her long ringless hands had lain in her lap as she talked. She was tall, but not too tall. He liked a woman to have height. He liked the paleness of her oval face, and the wide mouth with its satisfactory curves. Her dark brown eyes had a sparkle far at the back of them, like . . . like the reflection of a single star in a deep pool. . . .

He had been damned dull, as he always was.

"If she were only sitting there again," he thought, "I would say everything differently. I would say things that she might remember afterwards. I'm not such a dull fellow as all that."

Was he not? At least no woman would ever find out that he was not. He thought of his poverty and his book, that, in all probability, he alone believed in. He realized that his head had begun to ache again, and he closed his eyes.

Major Stroud went with Noel and Judy as far as the street door.

"He'll be all right," he assured them, indicating Chip upstairs. "Nothing to worry about now. Rest's doin' him good. Awfully good of you to come, Miss Pendleton, cheer him up. Terrible fellow for bein' alone, Chip is. Neglects his friends."

"Hasn't he any relations?" Noel asked.

Major Stroud shook his head.

"Orphan . . . only child, too. He doesn't see enough people. Not like me; I like to keep goin' . . . gaddin' about."

Judy was amused at this. Solid, heavy Major Stroud, picturing himself as a sort of social butterfly!

"But you two see a good deal of each other, don't you?" Judy wanted to feel sure that Chip was not altogether alone.

"Oh, Lord, yes! Good old Chip! Been through two campaigns together." Then as Judy held out her hand, " 'By, Miss Pendleton. I'll let you know how he gets on. Ought to be out to-morrow."

They walked briskly down Church Street, Judy with an arm through Noel's, and her chin buried in her furs.

"Well?" said Noel.

"Well?" she echoed.

"I said it first," remarked her brother.

"Translated, I take it to mean, how do I like Chip? Is that it?"

"Couldn't have put it better."

"I like him immensely," said Judy obligingly. "Now it's your turn."

"Same here." Then after a pause, "Feeling less spinsterish?"

"I don't feel in the least spinsterish, thank you."

"Well," he said, "I never saw you looking less so. Chip, poor devil, lay there and gazed with his soul in his eyes."

"Really, Noel!"

"Fact. But you'll have to change your methods. You'll have to cut that 'he'll have to come all the way to me' business. Because he won't; he's too shy."

Judy would have been in a cold fury had any one else dared to speak so to her, but she took it from Noel with perfect good humor.

"I gather you'd like me to see more of him."

"Well, why not? If ever a man needed some woman to take an interest in him, that man is Chip."

"He may need it, but from the little I've seen of him I don't think he wants it."

"Of course he wants it. He's human. I wouldn't mind having him in the family."

Judy had to laugh.

"Don't you think it's rather soon to make up your mind? After all, you hardly know him."

"That's nothing. I liked him the first minute I saw him."

"You have the impulsiveness of extreme youth."

"That's so trite," he remarked, "to throw my youth at me. You only say that when you can't think of anything else to say. You must cultivate originality of thought."

"I do," she retorted, "but it's good manners to adjust one's conversation to suit one's hearers. Now let's continue about Chip."

"He has no money," he went on, quite unruffled, "and that's a pity, because you won't get much from the family. Gordon will get it all. But you'd make a better poor man's wife than most girls. What about the simple life for a change?"

"You go too fast, my friend. I've nothing against the simple life—though why they call it that I can't think; there's nothing less simple than trying to live on nothing a year. But what I wish to point out to you is that Major Crosby, to begin with, is not a marrying man."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Noel, "what a cliché! How can a man be a marrying man until he marries?"

"To put it into words of one syllable, Major

Crosby is not the sort of man who contemplates marriage. He is wedded to his bachelorhood and his book."

"That's tosh."

"But," she went on, "I very much hope he will let us be his friends."

"Oh, he'll let us right enough; if that's what you want. By the way, we mustn't let the Bennetts know about the accident."

"Didn't Mills tell them?"

"Not he. I fixed it up with old Mills. Mrs. Bennett is a nice old thing, but she'd fuss, and Chip would hate that. I'm glad we let him think it was our car. We can explain to him some day. You see, it really was his fault. He didn't look where he was going—didn't even stop to listen, Mills says. But I don't want him to think we think that."

"I'll leave it to you, Noel. It's getting too complicated for me." Then she remembered something.

"Did you know Eric had gone to Paris to fetch Aunt Connie home?"

He whistled.

"No. Nobody told me."

"Claire only told me this morning. Eric has wired for rooms for her in some small hotel, in

Half Moon Street, I think. They'll be back tomorrow. Won't it be queer to have an aunt we've never seen since we were children?"

He agreed that it would.

"I think I shall rather like having a dissipated aunt," he remarked. "It's out of the common."

"I expect people have exaggerated things," Judy said. "And besides, she's getting on, you know. She's only a year or two younger than mother."

"Her sort never change," said the sage. "What about that rotten little Count?"

"I don't know what Eric means to do about him."

"Well, I know two people at least who will raise a row about her coming home. Mother and Louise."

"Nobody's told them yet," said Judy.

He whistled again.

"I see trouble ahead."

As they reached the house in Eaton Square the front door opened, and the figure of an immaculately dressed young man was sharply silhouetted against the yellow light.

"Hello, you two!" said he.

Gordon was extremely good-looking in his fair and rather wooden way. His beautiful evening clothes looked resplendent, and the coat he carried over one arm was there as a concession to his mother, for he was never cold.

"Hello, Gordon!" echoed the other two.

"Where've you been?" demanded the elder brother.

"Been to see a sick friend," said Noel.

Gordon looked at his sister.

"Are you coming to Lady Ottway's dance tonight? You were asked."

"I know. But I'm not coming. I can't stand her dances. I may be slow, but they're slower still."

"Don't say you can't stand her," advised Gordon, bending his handsome head to light a cigarette.

"Why not? If I feel like it?"

He threw away the match and puffed experimentally on the cigarette. Then, satisfied of a light, he said casually:

"Because she's going to be my mother-in-law. That's why."

"Gordon!" they exclaimed together.

"Fact. All arranged yesterday. Helen and I hope to be married early in June. So congratulate me."

"Gordon!" cried Judy again, "what a queer boy you are! I hadn't an inkling it had happened." She raised her face to kiss him, but he drew back.

"Not on the front steps. Keep that for later."

"That's so like you," she protested. "No one can see us. Anyway, Gordon, consider yourself kissed, and I do congratulate you, my dear, and I'm happy if you are. Does mother know?"

"Oh, yes. She's delighted, of course."

Noel put his hand on Gordon's shoulder.

"I'm awfully glad, Gordon old man."

"Thanks." He went down the steps and hailed a taxi that was crawling toward them. "I'd have told you before," he said over his shoulder, "only we don't keep the same hours. Never sure of seeing you. Well, so long!"

The taxi door shut with a bang that echoed loudly in the quiet square, and he was off.

"Isn't that Gordon all over?" asked Noel.

As Judy entered the hall she gave a little laugh that was almost a sob, and said:

"Thank God for you, Noel!"

CHAPTER X

Madame Claire was at her desk, writing. She was writing to Stephen, and when she did that she gave her whole attention to it.

"I am so sorry you are feeling less well. How is the phlebitis? No one ought to suffer from anything with such a pretty name. Did you ever stop to think that the names of diseases and the names of flowers are very similar? For instance, I might say, 'Do come and see my garden. It is at its best now, and the double pneumonias are really wonderful. I suppose the mild winter had something to do with that. I'm very proud of my trailing phlebitis, too, and the laryngitises and deep purple quinsies that I put in last year are a joy to behold. The bed of asthmas and malarias that you used to admire is finer than ever this summer, and the dear little dropsies are all in bloom down by the lake, and make such a pretty showing with the blue of the anthrax border behind them!'

"Enough of nonsense. There is a great deal

to tell you. I wrote you that Eric was on his way to Paris to fetch Connie. He found her, where I thought he would, and they returned to London together. He took rooms for her in a quiet little hotel, which I fear was a mistake, for Connie loathes quiet little hotels, and only goes to them when she must. However, we shall see. She came to see me the other day—poor Connie! She is, to use her own words, a wreck of a woman, but she trails the ghost of her beauty about with her, and Eric tells me people still turn to stare after her in the streets. She tried to talk to me as if we had parted only yesterday, and was as unemotional as one could wish, for which I was thankful, for emotions are only permissible when they are genuine, and not always then.

"I suppose I am a very odd old woman, Stephen, but I only felt for her what I would have felt for any other woman in her position. I had to keep reminding myself that this once beautiful, made-up woman was my daughter. I have never known that feverish mother-love that so many women experience. My children interested, amused and disappointed me—when I was stupid enough to be disappointed. I know better now. I would die for any of my children, but I cannot sentimentalize over them.

"How I digress! Connie is going to give London a try, and I hope to Heaven she will find something to interest her. She has no friends, so she will have to fall back, I suppose, on shops and theaters, and of course clothes, which she still loves. But she is not a woman to 'take up' things. I wish she were.

"But you will be most interested in Judy. I wrote you about the near-accident, and the man who was knocked down in the fog. He appears to have captivated both Judy and Noel, and they are bringing him here to tea this afternoon. I am most anxious to meet him, for something tells me that Judy is more interested in him than she has ever been in any man. But more of that in my next letter.

"Louise returns of her own free will—which must annoy her—to-morrow. I think she deferred her homecoming in the hope that Eric would send for her, but instead of that he begged her to stay as long as she wished. She has never met Connie, and of course they will dislike each other. At present neither she nor Millie know of Connie's return. I thought it better to let her take root a little first, for I think any unpleasantness during the first week or two would easily dislodge her.

"I do hope to see you here, Stephen. Do you plan and hope for it too?

"I will write again very soon.

"CLAIRE."

She always sent Dawson out to post her letters to Stephen the moment they were written. She knew he had not her vitality nor her interests. There was little to hold him to life except her letters, and the hope he had of seeing her and those about her again.

CHAPTER XI

LOUISE returned to London in a strange state of mind. In the first place, her family, who liked Eric, had not been disposed to listen sympathetically to her rather vague complaints. She had found her sister, an enthusiastic gardener, preoccupied and full of plans for altering the gardens of Mistley; her mother too engrossed with Theosophy to listen to earthly troubles, and her father too much upset over the budget. So she had been left to herself more than she had liked. She had made up her mind to stay until Eric expressed a desire for her return, but as he did no such thing, and she felt she couldn't stand another hour of boredom, she returned to town.

And there was something else. The day before she left, a humble cousin of her mother's came to tea. She had been to Paris for the first time in her life, and was not to be denied the greater joy of relating her impressions. The rest of the family, murmuring appropriate excuses, drifted away after tea, and Louise was left alone with the caller. It was then that Louise received a shock.

She heard that her husband had been seen in Paris. It came out quite naturally during the conversation. It also appeared that he had been seen at some private hotel with a lady. "I dare say—a relation?" The cousin's voice had an inquiring note. "I dare say you'll know who it was if I describe her. A tall lady, my friend said, not very young. Fair." And Louise said, with her brain whirling, "Oh, yes, a cousin." The visitor nodded. "So odd, wasn't it, my friend having seen your husband? One never expects to see any one one knows in Paris. It's not like dear London."

Louise was so amazed that she forgot to feel angry and outraged. She thought of it most of the night, and in the train next morning, and she thought of it—and it seemed stranger than ever then—when she was once more in her own home, among the familiar things she had lived with for eight years.

Eric was at the House. She couldn't remember whether it was Divorce Reform or the Plumage Bill. Anyway, he wasn't expected back till late. She longed for some one to talk to. She had no intimate woman friend with whom she could discuss her husband; in fact, she could think of no better ear in which to pour her troubled amazement than that of her husband's mother.

Lady Gregory was in, Dawson said over the telephone, and was not expecting visitors. She would be delighted to see Mrs. Eric.

If Louise had been accustomed to self-examination, she would have realized that she was less unhappy than she had been for some years. She was indeed conscious of an odd satisfaction. Eric, then, was less perfect than his friends and family believed. There was a chink in that shining armor, his light had suddenly become dimmed. That woman in Paris—she was not young—it had evidently been going on for years. Or was it the renewal of some old affair? Her informant had managed to convey to her that her husband's—"cousin did you say?"—had not looked—well—quite of their world. She was thankful for that. When Eric admired Lady Norah Thorpe-Taylor, or Mrs. Dennison, or that hideous, clever Madame Fonteyn, she resented it bitterly, for she knew they had what she had not—charm. So she scoffed at charm, and prided herself on having none, nor wishing to have.

But here was something different; here was a blemish in the fabric, a rotten spot brought for the first time to light. It put her on a new footing with him, a slightly elevated footing. Let him point, if he could, to anything unworthy in her life. She had always believed him to be fastidious. Well, he was not. But she was—perhaps she was too fastidious; but then she had the defects of her qualities. Let others touch pitch and be soiled. She could almost pity Eric for lacking what she had. After all, he was merely common clay, and she had been expected to prostrate herself before an idol. Ridiculous! She would try to forgive him. Perhaps he had found her difficult to live up to.

She grew greatly in her own eyes. She no longer felt herself dwarfed by him. He must understand that. Then she would forgive and forget—except at such times as it might suit her to remember.

* * * * * *

"My dear, how much better you look!" cried Madame Claire, as Louise came into the room. "You're a different creature. Come and tell me all about it."

As Dawson took her hat and coat, Louise made a mental note that it was time she had new ones. Later on, she might perhaps run over to Paris for a few days, and buy clothes there. Why not?

"Do I really look better? I feel it. It's been a delightful change, and of course one's family do appreciate one. It's like renewing one's girlhood."

"What an affected speech!" thought Madame Claire. "Louise has something on her mind." She then said aloud:

"It amuses me to hear you talk about renewing your girlhood. How old are you? I've a dreadful memory for these things. Thirty-five? Ridiculously young. I always feel you don't make the most of your youth and good looks."

Louise gave a few touches to her hair before a mirror, and took a chair on the other side of the fireplace. There was something very restful about this room of Madame Claire's. And her mother-in-law was a woman without prejudices, even where her own children were concerned. She felt she had done the right thing in coming to her.

"Would you be surprised to hear that I am going to turn over a new leaf? I feel I've been very much to blame. I've allowed myself to play third fiddle long enough."

"Good!" said Madame Claire. "And what else?"

"And," went on the younger woman, with a hint of defiance in her voice, "I'm not going to stand in awe of Eric any longer."

"In awe—of Eric?" Madame Claire laughed. "My dear Louise, that you've certainly never done."

"Well, it's what I was always expected to do. I've thought a good deal about what you said the last time I was here. You were partly right. I suppose I have sulked. Well, I'm not going to sulk any more. Eric isn't a demi-god. I know now there's no earthly reason why I should look up to him, and admire him. He's just like any other man."

"But I could have told you that any time these last eight years!" cried Madame Claire, more puzzled than amused. "And besides, you yourself seem to have been well acquainted with his failings. I have sometimes thought you saw nothing else."

"That's because I was annoyed by his perfections."

"Perfections! My dear, I could swear Eric has never been a prig!"

"Well, he never seemed to make mistakes like other people. And he always seemed to expect things of me that I wasn't capable of. It got on my nerves."

"Naturally."

"He always made me feel I was disappointing him. And that isn't very pleasant. But now," said Louise, coming to the crux of the matter, "he has disappointed me. So we are quits at last."

"Ah," said Madame Claire, still in the dark. "That must be a relief."

"Oddly enough, it is a relief. Horrible as the whole thing is, I—I could almost be glad of it."

"I was wrong," thought Madame Claire, remembering a conversation she had had with Judy. "Eric is interested in some other woman, at last."

"And what is this horrible thing?" she asked.

"You may as well hear it," said Louise recklessly. "If I can bear it, I should think you could too. While I was away, Eric wired me he was going out of town for a few days. He didn't say where. I know now. He was seen at a small hotel in Paris with a—a questionable-looking woman. So our idol has feet of clay."

There was both bitterness and triumph in her voice. Madame Claire gripped the arms of her chair and tried not to laugh. What should she do? Good had been known to come out of evil. Should she and Eric let Louise think—what she thought? Her crying need was evidently to find Eric in the wrong. Should they let her?

"I won't say it wasn't a shock to me," Louise went on. "It was. I heard it while I was at Mistley. I know that it is true."

Madame Claire was thinking:

"She is bound to know the facts sooner or later, and then she'll feel she has been made a fool of—a thing only saints can forgive. And yet, it's an opportunity of a sort. But what a paltry business!"

"Suppose this were really true, Louise," she said. "At the moment I am neither denying the possibility of it, nor affirming it. But suppose it were true. How would it affect your feeling for Eric?"

"As a good woman—and I hope I am that—it revolts me. But . . . perhaps I've been hard . . . perhaps he's found a lack in me. . . . I dare say he has. . . . Oh!" she cried suddenly with real emotion, "I want to forgive him! I would forgive him."

Madame Claire felt she was hearing something she had no right to hear. She must leave this to Eric. Stupid mistake as it was, it might be the means of clearing the air. She would have nothing to do with it.

"My dear," she said, "I am going to forget you have told me this. Later you'll understand why. I think the whole thing can be explained, but for your explanation I prefer you should go to Eric. It concerns him the most."

She would hear no more of it. There was something indecent in Louise's willingness to forgive. While they talked of other things her indignation grew. Eric's wife wanted to believe the worst of him. By the time her visitor was ready to go, she found it difficult to be polite.

"I am delighted to see you looking so much better, and so much more cheerful," she told her, as she said good-by. "And should there prove to be nothing in this story, don't be disheartened. You mustn't let one disappointment discourage you."

Louise, wondering what she meant, kissed her mechanically.

"Good-by. I'll come and see you again in a few days if I may."

"Do. I shall expect really good news from you then."

When the door had closed on her, Madame Claire sat looking into the fire with a flush on her cheeks. Presently she took from a bowl on the table beside her a few violets, and after wiping their stems, tucked them into her dress.

"You deserve a bouquet," she said to herself, "for not having been ruder. I expect they're writing in their book up aloft, 'January 30, Madame Claire rather less pleasant to-day to her irritating daughter-in-law.' Well, let them."

* * * * * *

Louise went home and dressed for dinner feeling like a warrior on the eve of battle. There had been many coldnesses in that house, but, as far back as she could remember, not a single contretemps. Dinner was at half-past eight, and there was a possibility that Eric would be late. They usually dined at eight, but the Plumage Bill—or was it the Divorce Reform Bill?—would keep him. She did her hair in a way that he had once admired, and put on a blue tea-gown that he had called charming. In fact, she took far greater pains over her rôle as injured wife than she had ever taken before. And saw no humor in it either.

Eric thought he had never seen her look so well. Take away her coldness and her pettiness, he said to himself, and she would be lovely. Perhaps if she had married some one else she would have been neither cold nor petty. He often felt very sorry for her, for though he had made the mistake, she, no doubt, suffered the most. They talked commonplaces during dinner, but once they were alone in the library, Louise confronted him with heightened color and a voice she could barely control.

It was a pitiful little comedy. Her triumph was so short lived, and the bubble of her advantage over him so soon pricked. At the end of it she found refuge from her humiliation in tears. Eric had never seen her cry like that before, and it moved him. He felt like confessing to things he had never done, or abasing himself in some way. He understood her for the first time, and though there was something ignoble in it all, and he felt the prickings of anger, he nevertheless thought her very human, at least, in wanting to find some weakness to forgive him for.

He put his arm about her, half laughing.

"Look here, Louise, don't be so cast down. There's always the stage door—or I could forge a check to oblige, or elope with your maid. What would you like me to do?"

She made no answer, but buried her wet face in a cushion.

"Or why not just forgive me on general principles for being a stupid fellow, and not understanding you? I expect I often hurt you when I am least aware of it. We humans are like that—we understand each other's sensibilities so little.

Why not forgive me for that? Forgive me for not having known how to make you happier?"

"You are making fun of me," she sobbed. "You are only sneering at me."

Something told him that she was softening, that soon she would be talking with him like a reasonable being. Was it possible that from to-night he might feel he had a friend for a wife instead of an enemy? He knew he must not let pride stand in the way of it—nor justice even. There was nothing to be gained and much to be lost by telling her that during the whole of their married life she had persistently played the fool.

"On my honor I am not," he said. "Louise, listen to me. I am a blundering fellow. Somehow or other I have always failed to give you what you wanted. That being so, I ask your help. Help me to be what you wish me to be. We are young, and there is still time. I will do anything. I beg you to help me."

He made her raise her head, and looked her full in the face with all the intensity those blazing blue eyes of his were capable of.

"Will you help me?"

It was undoubtedly the great moment of Louise's life. She knew it. Eric had made it possible for her to be magnanimous. But the gods were not kind. What she was going to say to him they alone knew, for at that instant the maid came to the door, to say that Countess Chiozzi was on the telephone and would like to speak to Mr. Gregory. For Louise the interruption was maddening. Eric was about to send word that he would ring her up in the morning, and so return as quickly as possible to the business in hand, when Louise said in a stifled voice:

"I want it clearly understood that that woman is not to come into this house."

It was hopeless, then. Eric turned to the maid.

"I'll speak to her," he said, and left the room. They would have to separate. There was nothing else for it.

Louise sat with bent head, smoothing out a handkerchief on her knee. She had not meant to say that. The words had come through sheer force of habit. She knew her moment was gone now, and she believed that it would never come again. If Eric had really loved her, he would have seen that she longed to be different, and that under her coldness and bitterness there was only unhappiness and longing! He ought to have *seen!* She folded the handkerchief and pressed it to her eyes again. She was more miserable than ever.

CHAPTER XII

Major Stroud had also been invited to tea at Madame Claire's, but was to be out of town, and as Noel had to see a man about a job, the party had dwindled to three, and Chip found his way to the hotel alone. He was prompt to the minute and feeling extremely nervous. He had so looked forward to seeing Judy again that he felt sure everything—except Judy herself—would be disappointing. Madame Claire would find him uninteresting, and Judy would be kind but bored. He would very likely upset his tea. He had been a fool to accept. He had far better have stayed away and allowed himself to return to the comfortable oblivion from which the accident had dislodged him. Better be a kindly memory than a dull actuality.

But there was something reassuring about the way the homely Dawson opened the door to him and took his hat and coat. She received him like an old friend and smiled as though she shared some secret with him. The sight of Judy and his hostess bending over plans for a Pisé de Terre cottage to be built for Judy on Madame Claire's little place in Sussex, also gave him courage. He loved plans, and was soon making suggestions and alterations in a way that, Judy said, was as domineering as an architect's.

"It's entirely furnished and decorated inside," she said. "I've thought about it so much that I wouldn't be surprised to find it had materialized. You must look next time you go down, Madame Claire. It might look rather odd without its outsides of course."

It had long been a dream of Judy's to have her own cottage—shared, needless to say, with Noel—and if they could only get it built cheaply enough, there was a chance that it might be fulfilled. At any rate, they enjoyed planning it, and if it served no other purpose it put Chip at his ease with them—a thing she had prayed for.

Madame Claire guessed easily enough that he was on the way to falling in love with Judy, and that Judy herself was on the same road. She thought there was something very lovable about Chip, and felt sure that he was as gallant a soldier as he was a modest one. Major Stroud had more than hinted to Judy that his D.S.O. should have been a V.C. Madame Claire loved a good soldier, for she had a theory that to be a good soldier a man must be a great gentleman. And, like Judy, she felt the charm of the man of forty—the age that lies like a savory filling between what is callow in the young generation and outworn in the old.

His poverty had kept him out of touch with things. She guessed that if he danced at all, it would be in the stiff, uncompromising manner of the late nineties. He should learn the new ways. He wasn't nearly old enough to think of himself as on the shelf.

Judy inquired about his injuries. Had the stiffness nearly gone? No, it was no good his saying that it had entirely gone, because she had noticed that he was limping slightly when he came in.

"That's old age," he said.

"Very well. Only don't forget to limp the next time we meet. And what about your head?"

"Oh, quite recovered, thanks! That is, it aches a bit, of course, if I do much writing, but the doctor says that's bound to be so for a while. Really," he said, turning to Madame Claire, "I feel I owe my life to Miss Pendleton and her chauffeur. Any one else would have run gayly over me and gone on. I think it was such amazingly good luck that it happened to be that particular car."

"I'm rather inclined to agree with you," laughed Madame Claire. "Some day I'd like to hear something about your book. It sounds tremendously interesting. But what I'd like to know now is this. Are all your eggs in one basket? I mean, does this book occupy your whole time, or do you work on it when other occupations permit?"

"I'm afraid that . . . well, that not only are all my eggs in one basket, but that there's only one egg. You see," he explained, "I chucked the army in order to give all my time to it. It meant as much to me as that. To my mind, no one's ever written scientifically enough about religions."

"That may be, but I feel you need diversions. When people become so obsessed by one idea that they walk under omnibuses and into motor cars, it's time for an antidote."

"That's just what I did," he admitted.

"Very well then, I suggest diversions."

"But what sort? I play golf now and then, but it doesn't take my mind off the book. Why, I remember perfectly solving a problem once—it had something to do, I think, with levitation—while I was trying to get my ball out of a bunker."

Madame Claire laughed heartily.

"You're a most unusual man then. What else can we think of, Judy?"

"There's always dancing," said Judy.

"Dancing! Of course! He must learn to dance. You can't dance and think about religions. I defy you to do it."

"But I couldn't dance. I'm too old and stiff. Besides, no one would dance with me."

"Three excuses, and none of them any good."

"I'll teach you," Judy said. "I might even dance with you."

"Would you really? That's awfully kind. But I ought to tell you that I really don't think I'm teachable."

"You must let me judge of that. We might begin at Eaton Square one night, in a small way. Gordon and Noel and I often ask a few friends in for dancing, and there's a little anteroom reserved for practicing. There will only be a few, and it won't be at all alarming even for hermits."

Chip looked pleased and dubious at the same time.

"There won't be any flappers, will there? I'm terrified of flappers."

"Nothing more flapperish than myself," laughed Judy. "Was I ever a flapper, Madame Claire?"

"Never. Millie kept you out of sight until you were able to fly. I didn't altogether approve. After all, we must all try our wings some time. You see, I like the present day, Major Crosby. I like it far better than what people call my own day, though why this one isn't just as much mine as it is anybody's, I really don't know."

"You're very greedy," Judy told her. "You had Disraeli and Gladstone and Jenny Lind, and now you want Lloyd George and Charlie Chaplin. All the same, I don't wonder you like our age best. That one was so full of hypocrisy and sentiment."

Madame Claire agreed with this.

"We were always pretending things. Men were always gentlemen or monsters. Young girls were always innocent as flowers. We even tried to believe that wars and poverty were picturesque and romantic."

"And you talked too much about love," said Judy. "That sort of golden, sticky, picture-book love that even we were taught to expect. And a gigantic hoax it is!"

"A hoax?" Chip looked at her to see if she were joking.

"Of course it is. Oh, I believed in it too, once. It's like Santa Claus. I never could see that the pleasure of believing in him was worth the awfulness of finding out that he's only a myth."

Chip wondered if she were making fun of love, or whether she was merely holding the schoolgirl's idea of it up to scorn. He didn't know. He had never expected to find a love that would transform the world, and he had found it. What he had yet to discover was that women, after all, are the terrible realists. Men manage to preserve their illusions better. Few of them love with their eyes open, and women only really love when their eyes are open. For women are meant to see faults, being the mothers of children, and their critical faculties are more on the alert.

Judy had looked for a miracle. She had been searching for a fairy castle, and now found herself becoming interested in an imperfect modern dwelling. Chip had not asked for a miracle, and lo! it had come to pass. He listened to Judy making fun of romantic love—which she did with great satisfaction to herself until interrupted by tea—and refused to believe that she meant what she said. For romantic love does undoubtedly come to very simple people, and Chip was very simple.

He didn't trouble to disagree with her. He was happy to be hearing from her own lips that she had never been in love. Not that it made any difference, beyond the pleasure that it gave him, for to love Judy was not the same thing where he was concerned as to make love to her. That was unthinkable.

They left Madame Claire's together at six, and Chip, happily reckless as well as recklessly happy, walked with Judy all the way to Eaton Square. It was settled that he was to dine there and begin his rejuvenation the following Wednesday night. For Judy told herself that she couldn't keep Chip a secret from the family forever, and they might as well meet him and get done with it.

"I hope you won't be frightened of mother," she said. "I don't know why it is, but she does frighten people. I don't think she wants to, really. She and father are very keen on what Noel calls the 'kin game.' You know the sort of thing I mean—who's related to who and how."

"I see," said Chip.

"So perhaps you'd better tell me some of your family history. Then I could tell them, and you won't be bothered. Because they're sure to want to know."

She colored as she said it, and Chip guessed that there were mortifying experiences behind her warning.

"With all the pleasure in the world," he said. "Only there isn't much to tell."

He made short work of what there was. His father, Graham Crosby, an explorer well known to geographical societies, had lost his life from fever in a South American jungle at the age of thirty-seven. His mother, faced with the prospect of almost unendurable poverty, tried her hand at novel writing. "The sentimental kind that you would have hated," he said with a smile. However, they had an enormous success, and enabled her to send her only son to Sandhurst. She died at the close of the Boer War. They were not related to any Crosbys that he knew of, except some excessively dull ones who lived somewhere near Aberdeen.

"Very poor pickings for your mother, I'm afraid," he said with a laugh.

Chip left her at the door with his rather old-fashioned bow, and she watched him until he reached the corner. There he turned, as she had guessed he would, and looked back, and as the maid opened the door, she waved her hand to him gayly. He walked stiffly, thanks to the accident, and leaned a little on his stick. Dear old Chip! . . .

So this was love! With her it took the form of a passionate tenderness. She wanted him to have success, and happiness. She wanted to help him to get them.

For Chip, the impossible thing that had happened was too dazzling, as yet, to be more than blinked at. It was as though an old dried stick had burst into blossom and leaf. As though water had been turned into wine. That Judy might be persuaded to care for him in return never entered his head. To love her was wonderful enough. Let a man of her own world, a man of wealth and standing, try to win her. Some day such a man would succeed, and he would have to bear that as he had borne lesser things. If his book received recognition, he might continue to enjoy this delightful friendship. If not, he must quietly drop out of Judy's life. For he believed that a man had no right to accept a charming woman's friendship unless he could lay appropriate and frequent sacrifices upon her altar. Which shows that the world had been rolling along under Chip's very nose without his having observed the manner of its rolling.

One pleasure he permitted himself that day. He went into a little flower shop in Church Street and bought two dozen pink roses. It was one of his happiest moments; he had been so denied the joy of giving. On his card he wrote:

"I hope you will forgive me if I am doing a presumptuous thing in sending you these few flowers. But if they give you a little pleasure, I shall be well content."

He felt bold, because he had nothing to lose. It was early February, too, with the softness of coming spring in the air, and hope dies hard in the spring, even at forty.

CHAPTER XIII

STEPHEN'S letter in reply to Madame Claire's last was brief. She guessed that he was still suffering, and was not up to writing at any length.

"*Bronchitis and phlebitis,*" he wrote, "*are not as pretty as they sound, although your garden amused me very much. Miss McPherson would be happy in it, that's certain. When I'm feeling better I see her casting longing glances at old Jock Wetherby, who's got more ailments than the doctors can put names to. But when I'm at my worst she clucks over me like a proud hen.*

"*Connie's Count seems to suspect collusion. He tried to pump me about her yesterday. I was out in the sun for five minutes, and he appeared so promptly I think he'd been waiting for me. As soon as he began asking questions I had a coughing fit, so he went away. From what I hear—for I listen to gossip when it suits me to do so—Connie could get a divorce ten times over. I expect he misses her in a way. He found he could make her suffer—an occupation his sort delights in.*

"Well, Claire, my dear, I cannot write more to-night. You are wonderful, and your letters are my great joy. They soothe me. I find myself growing less short-tempered, less out of love with my fellow man.

"There is a little poem that comes to my mind now and speaks of you.

"'The world is young to-day:
Forget the gods are old,
Forget the years of gold
When all the months were May.

A little flower of Love
Is ours, without a root,
Without the end of fruit,
Yet—take the scent thereof.

There may be hope above,
There may be rest beneath;
We see them not, but Death
Is palpable—and Love.'

"It is a charming thing, and applies to old friends who love one another and whose days are transient, as well as to young lovers, whose love is perhaps transient.

"Write soon. Tell me more about Judy.

"STEPHEN."

Madame Claire answered almost at once:

"Dear Stephen,

"I have your little poem by heart. Thank you for it. The older I grow, the more I value the poets. They are the bravest people I know, for they sing in defiance of a world out of joint. Think of touching the high peaks of rapture with coal at its present price, in the midst of strikes, and a much advertised crime wave! It is difficult to see that the world has improved since the war, but at least one can see that it has changed, and I like to think that it CAN *only change for the better. So I cling to that thought and read the poets, not being one of those who can help to make it better. I feel about the world as I might feel about an Inn where I have supped and been kindly served. I hope it may flourish and not fall into evil hands. Not that I expect to return. It was, after all, only a night's stopping place. But I should like other travelers to find it as I found it, or somewhat better.*

"Judy came here to tea a day or two ago, and there came also the victim of the accident in the fog. He is, or soon will be, in love with her, and something of the sort is happening to Judy. If anything should come of it—and I feel that it may, things would not be easy for them. Millie would give the clothes off her back, and so would

John, for the eldest son, but they expect their daughter to marry for a living. I would do what I could, but that would be little. My income since the war has dwindled surprisingly, and I have some of Robert's poor relations to help. Of course, from Millie's point of view, the man is utterly unsuitable, but he is a gallant fellow, and life has been none too kind to him. I fear, somehow, that he is one of life's inexplicable failures, but I like him none the less for that.

"Connie has conceived an extravagant admiration for Noel. I think I said that she was not a woman to take up things, but I was wrong, for she has 'taken up' Noel. And really, it is amazing the change he has already wrought in her. She takes his frankness and frequent scoldings in a way I never dreamed she would. He is kindness itself to her, takes her to theaters and concerts, and seems to find her an amusing companion. He thinks she has had a pretty bad time of it—though he admits it's her own fault—and is bent on cheering her up. She adores his brutal honesty and his entire lack of respect for age, position, or human frailties. The first time they lunched together, they met at the Ritz, and Connie, it appears, was ablaze with paint. Noel refused to set foot in the dining room until she had

washed her face, and in the end she meekly sat down with nothing more in the way of make-up than a dusting of powder on her nose. Of course he is a godsend to her. Millie is very angry with me, and Louise will have none of her. Judy gets on with her well enough, but she doesn't amuse Judy as she does Noel.

"Did I tell you Louise heard Eric was in Paris with a 'questionable looking woman'? She was nobly prepared to forgive him, but when she learned that it was only Connie, her humiliation knew no bounds. I fear she is colder to him than ever now.

"Well, well, they must all go through with it as we did. I thank Heaven every day that Time has given me the right to sit quietly on my hilltop. I can still hear the sounds of the conflict below, and the cries of the wounded, but though they are my nearest and dearest I am too conscious of the transience of things, too aware of yesterdays and to-morrows—especially to-morrows—to concern myself greatly. I want them to be happy, but I know they won't be, and I am not God to confer or withhold. I can do nothing but laugh at or comfort them a little. Do you think me hard? No, you know that I am not. The happiest of them all is Noel, for he, like me,

is a looker-on. I don't know how he has managed to exchange the arena for the spectators' gallery, but he has. I think it is because he wants nothing for himself.

"As for Gordon, he is too ambitious to be happy. He is marrying partly to suit his mother, and partly to gratify his passion for being among the big-wigs, where of course, as Lord Ottway's son-in-law, he will be. But he doesn't know his Helen—yet. I think I do. Her chin is too long and her nose too high.

"Oh, the joy of wanting nothing! The joy of being eighty and immune! But I, even I, have one wish. And that is to see you, my old friend, again. But it is a pleasant want, like a hunger that is soon to be satisfied. For I feel I cannot lose you. Here, or there—what does it matter? I imagine you wince at that, foolish old Stephen!

"Write to me soon. I do hope you are better.

"Yours,

"CLAIRE."

CHAPTER XIV

It was February and it was sunny, and Noel had persuaded Connie to take a little gentle exercise in the Park.

She was finding London bearable, thanks to her nephew, and although she had, she said, nothing to look forward to, she was content with the present as long as the present remained as it was now.

They were discussing men in general, a topic that never lost its interest for Connie.

"Can't think why you're so keen on foreigners," Noel remarked; then said in his merciless way, "the only Englishman you ever had much to do with you ran away from."

Connie was quite soberly dressed in a dark blue coat and skirt, relieved by furs, hat, shoes and gloves of her favorite gray. She was no more made up than most of the other women who passed them. It was her forty-eighth birthday, and to celebrate it they were going to lunch at Claridge's later.

"Foreigners interest me so much more," she replied. "They understand women."

"Too damn well," agreed Noel. "Besides, the sort of men you mean only understand one sort of woman. They wouldn't understand Judy, for instance."

Connie smiled deprecatingly and put her head on one side.

"Well, as to that, I'm not sure I understand her myself. Frankly, I'm a little disappointed in Judy."

"You can't appreciate her, Connie. That's why."

"Perhaps." No one ever took offense at Noel. "To my mind she isn't feminine enough. She's handsome, but she has no magnetism, no allure."

"Nice English girls don't go in for allure," Noel said.

"Pooh!" She laughed rather scornfully. "Because they don't know how."

"Exactly," agreed her nephew. "And a good thing too. Look where it landed you."

"Now you're being rude and British, but I forgive you. And at any rate, I have lived."

It was Noel's turn to laugh scornfully.

"Lived! You surely don't call that living? Junketing around Europe with a lot of bounders! Why, Connie, you little innocent, you'd have lived a whole lot more if you'd stuck to Humphries and brought up a family."

She threw him an appealing look.

"You might remember that it's my birthday," she protested.

"Jove, that's so. And I'm hungry. Let's start walking toward Claridge's."

"Walk? It's too far. We must have a taxi."

"No, we mustn't. Great Scott, Connie, we've only walked half a mile or so. What'll you do in the next war?"

"Well, be nice to me then." She gave in as she usually did. "You know I'm horribly worried. I may have to go back to Chiozzi almost any day. If he finds out where I am——"

"Nonsense. He can't make you go. You ought to divorce the little beast. I don't call that a marriage. And anyway, one more scandal won't matter much."

"I'm afraid of him."

"Has he any money of his own, or are you supporting him?"

"Oh, he has money of his own, but he's gambled away most of it. He gambled away most of mine, too. I didn't know how to stop it. Morton Freeman ought to have tied it up in some way, but you see he died so suddenly . . . that awful *Titanic*. . . ."

"What sort of a fellow was Freeman?"

"Oh, very nice, and very fond of me. But you don't like foreigners."

"I never said so. And besides, I don't call Americans foreigners."

"He stayed on the ship," Connie went on. "He made me go. It was so brave of him. I wasn't really in love with him. I've never really loved anybody but Petrovitch. But I was sorry."

"Where is Petrovitch now?"

"In America, I think, but I'm not sure. He never writes to me." She sighed.

"How are you getting on with Louise?" Noel asked, thinking it was time to change the subject. "I'd love to see you two together!"

"You never will," Connie said with feeling. "Eric needn't try to bring us together, either. I've seen her, and that's enough. How I hate those thin-lipped, straw-colored women! How Eric could have married her when he might have married any one, I cannot imagine."

"People have these sudden fancies," said Noel.

"What about Gordon? Is it true he's really engaged to Helen Dane? Not that I care much, as he's never had the politeness to come and see me."

"He's engaged right enough. I suppose he's happy. Gordon closes up like an oyster if you touch on anything personal. We've never discussed anything in our lives. Mother's frightfully pleased about it."

"What's the girl like?"

"Oh, she's all right, but she's cut to pattern."

"Pretty?"

"So so. Too bony, I think. But she suits Gordon. Related to everybody, rich, correct, hasn't got an original thought in her head. Thinks she's literary because young Shawn Bridlington the poet goes and reads his verses in her mother's drawing-room. Affects the Bloomsbury people. Opens bazaars and things. Jove! I'd rather marry a factory girl with a harelip."

Much of this was Greek to his aunt, who had the misfortune never to have heard of the Bloomsbury people.

"And what about Judy and that man she nearly ran over?"

"Why?" Noel asked innocently, not wishing to discuss Judy and her affairs with Connie. "What about them?"

"Is there anything in it? I hope not, because the thing's ridiculous. Who is he? What is he?"

Noel gave an amused chuckle.

"Connie, you really are a joy. *You* to ask 'Who is he? What is he?' Don't you try to take a leaf out of mother's book. It isn't your rôle."

"Judy's my niece, after all," protested Connie "Isn't it natural that I should be interested?"

"Natural enough," said Noel. "I hope you are. Ask me if he's a good fellow, and if I think he could make her happy, and I'll be delighted to answer you. But 'who is he?' . . . that sort of tosh. . . . I should think you'd earned the right to be human, if anybody had."

"Very well," answered his chastened aunt. "Is he good enough?"

"I think he's as near being good enough as any fellow I've met. If he had any money at all, I should call it a match. But he hasn't, and I don't know how Judy would like being downright poor."

"All the same," Connie insisted, "I can't help wishing that my only niece would make a good match."

Noel raised his eyes heavenward, despairingly.

"For a woman who deemed the world well lost for love. . . ."

"I know," interrupted Connie. "But you see Judy hasn't my temperament."

"I'll refrain from saying 'Thank God!' because it's your birthday," returned Noel. "Here we are, and I bet I do justice to the lunch."

They both did, and Connie had occasion to congratulate the head waiter on a very perfect Petite Marmite. She was always at her best in restaurants. She loved the crowds and the chatter and the music, and the feeling that she was being looked at, and was still worth looking at. There was even a secret hope in her heart that people would take Noel for her son. She liked to imagine them saying, "There's a son who enjoys going about with his mother." And Noel, who really liked Connie and pitied her, had hopes of knocking some sense into her foolish head in time. It touched him, too, that she depended on him so.

Two men came in and sat at a table at Connie's left, and somewhat behind her. One was fat and old, with a round, coarse face. The other was at least impressive, and Noel found himself watching him. He had a dome-shaped head, rather flat at the back, and his hair, which began high up at the very summit of his temples was long and carefully brushed so as to fall slightly over the collar behind. A pair of level, frowning eyes looked out scornfully from under projecting brows, and the wide, thin lips protruded in a fierce pout. Presently, when something annoyed him, he spoke with great brusqueness to the waiter, scarcely moving his lips as he did so.

Connie heard his voice and turned, and their eyes met. Noel heard her draw in her breath sharply, and for a moment she sat staring, motionless. There was not the slightest change in the man's expression, as he stared back at Connie. There was an empty seat at his table, and suddenly he raised a large hand with spade-shaped fingers, and beckoned.

Connie started up from her chair like an automaton, and would have gone to him, but Noel's muscular hand closed on her wrist and fastened it to the table.

"Keep your seat!" he commanded. "Are you a dog to obey that man's whistle? If he wants to talk to you, let him come here."

Then as if ashamed of taking part in such an intense little drama, he dropped her hand and said lightly:

"Who's your friend, Connie? I don't care for his manners."

Connie strove to reach the normal again.

"It's Petrovitch," she said, scarcely above a whisper.

"Thought so. Do you realize he beckoned to you as though you were his slave? I'd like to wring his beastly neck."

"Noel! It's Petrovitch! What does he care about our silly little conventions? He wants me. I must talk to him."

"Then he can damn well come here. And for Heaven's sake don't make a scene, Connie. Eat your lunch."

"I can't eat. I haven't seen him for fifteen years. Oh, Noel, I've never loved any one as I've loved him."

"Well, I don't see that it's anything to have hysterics about. What of it? He'll come and talk to you, I expect, when he's finished that enormous lunch he's ordered. That is, if you're foolish enough to wait."

"I must. Oh, Noel, have pity on me!"

Her lips trembled.

"Cheer up!" he said. "I'll sit here all day, if you'll order another Entre Côte. Have you ever noticed what queerly shaped heads some of these fellows have? If I were a woman, I'd study phrenology a bit. That's where you have the best of us. You women may—and I expect often do—

possess heads a congenital idiot would be proud of, but we never find it out. Don't even show your ears, now. It isn't fair. But your friend over there—I could tell you a whole lot about him just by looking at the back of his head."

"Oh, he's a devil if you like," said the unhappy Connie, "but I love him. And he loved me, once. I'd die for him."

"Neurotic," Noel told her.

"Call it what you like. I'd rather spend five minutes with him than a lifetime with any one else."

"I'd like to spend five minutes with him myself," said Noel. "Alone. Oh," remembering his empty sleeve, "I expect he'd wipe up the floor with me, but I'd tell him a few simple, home truths first."

"I tell you, Noel, ordinary rules of conduct don't apply to men like Petrovitch. He's a genius, a heaven-born genius. You've never even heard him play. There's nothing like it—there never has been anything like it. Oh, yes, he's made me suffer, but I forgive him for it, because he's a king among men."

"A king! My good aunt, pull yourself together and observe the way he eats asparagus. There! I knew it . . . he's dribbled some of the melted butter down his chin and on to his waistcoat. How would you like the job of spot-remover to His Highness? I suppose some wretched woman—but has he a wife? I forget."

"He has had two," murmured Connie.

"How any woman——" began Noel, and gave it up.

"There are men like that. They are unattractive to other men perhaps, but they have an irresistible fascination for some women. They command—we obey."

"Cut it, Connie!" exclaimed Noel. "Do you mean to tell me that if that bounder, to satisfy his filthy vanity, said 'Come,' you'd go? Like a wretched poodle on a string. Good Lord! Where is your pride?"

She shook her head.

"I only know that I must talk to him again."

They finished lunch with little conversation. Noel was angry and uncomfortable. As they drank their coffee, and he saw that Petrovitch too was nearing the end, he made another effort.

"Connie, let's get out before he's finished. Will you? You'll be glad of it all your life. I promise you you will. It means a lot to me."

His earnestness had no effect. He went on:

"You've always followed the line of least resistance—that's why you're what you are now. You've chucked away your life. Don't do it again, Connie. You know what that man's opinion of you is. He showed it pretty clearly when he beckoned to you just now. There's just one way you can hurt him—and one way you can prove to him, and to yourself, that you've got the right stuff in you. Leave here with me, without speaking to him. Please, Connie. Will you?"

She wavered. Then she seized upon some words of his, and he knew that he had lost.

"Hurt him? I wouldn't hurt him for anything in the world. I want to show him that one woman at least is faithful to him, to the end."

This was too much for Noel. He remembered the French officer, Freeman, Chiozzi, and felt sick. His impulse was to get up and leave her then and there, but he stayed with a set jaw and angry eyes. His hair seemed to bristle with antagonism when Petrovitch pushed back his chair at last and said to his companion:

"Pardon—a moment. I go to speak to a lady." And in a second he was at their table.

Connie gave him both hands without speaking, and he bent over them with a smile that was a mere widening of those protruding lips.

"Connie! As beautiful as ever! My dear

lady, the sight of you takes ten—fifteen years from my age. I feel young again, and happy. You come to my concert next week, eh? I play for you."

"Same old stuff!" thought Noel.

Connie released her hands, and when she spoke her voice was breathless and unnatural, as if she had been running.

"I . . . I didn't know you were here. . . . I hadn't seen any notices. I thought you were still in America. This is a great surprise to me, Illiodor." Then, turning to Noel, "I want you to meet Monsieur Petrovitch, Noel. My nephew . . ."

Noel, standing behind his chair and feeling younger and more intolerant than he had ever felt in his life, inclined his head.

"Eh? Your nephew? Charmed." The great man bowed, impressively. "Are you too a lover of music?" He bent his frowning gaze upon the young man. "But no, you are English. So, you will say, is the adorable aunt. But she is different. She is of the world, eh? She loves beauty, art, genius." He moved his large hands. "Ah, Connie, you and I had much in common. They told me you had married again. Is it true?"

"I married Count Chiozzi, four years ago," she told him. "My husband is in the south of France."

"Always the good cosmopolitan!" he approved. Then turning once more to Noel:

"You also will come to my concert."

"Expects me to say, 'Yes, master!' " thought Noel.

"No, thanks," he answered evenly and casually. "I don't care for concerts."

Petrovitch looked at Connie, working his prominent brows.

"Philistine, eh? No matter, you are one of us. I am staying here. You will do me the honor to dine with me to-morrow night. Good! We have much to say to one another. Perhaps also my friend Silberstein, eh? He is gourmet. He will eat, you will talk to me." He could frown and smile at the same time, Noel observed. "At eight."

"I'll come," said the fascinated Connie.

He bent once more over her hands.

"Au revoir, my dear friend," he said, in his strangely harsh voice. "To-morrow night." Then with an indifferent nod of the head in Noel's direction, he returned to his table.

Connie paid the bill—she always insisted on that—in a sort of trance, with a little excited smile on her lips. As they got up to go out she threw a glance at Petrovitch, and left the room, still with that trancelike smile. It irritated Noel beyond expression. It plainly said:

"He is not indifferent to me. He has forgotten nothing. I shall live again."

Very little was said on the way to Connie's hotel. She was beyond speech for the present—she was reliving the days when the world was at Petrovitch's feet, and he, the master, was at hers. For she believed now that it was the depth and tumult of his passion for her that had carried her away. She had forgotten her notes, her flowers, the interviews she had prayed for—forgotten all that. She won him by deliberate assault, but once won, she became his slave, and it was as his adoring slave in those first, brief, happy months, that she liked to remember herself.

Noel was disgusted and annoyed. Also, he was extremely disappointed. Was all his scolding, his chaffing, his affection for her, the influence he had gained, to go for nothing now? Simply because that . . . brute . . . had turned up again? Was there nothing he could say or do to save her? What would Claire say? And then he asked himself, well, what *would* Claire say? Why not find out? That was an idea. He would find out.

"You'll come upstairs, won't you?" she asked when they were in the hall of the hotel. Noel thought her invitation somewhat perfunctory. He suspected she wanted to be alone with her thoughts. Nevertheless, he meant to come, presently.

"Yes, I'll be up in a minute," he said. "You go on. I've got to ring up somebody."

The lift carried her up out of his sight and he went into the telephone booth and rang up Madame Claire. Her telephone stood on a table close beside her chair, and he had hardly a second to wait before she answered.

"Yes? Oh, it's you, Noel. Where are you?"

He told her. Then he described briefly the luncheon at Claridge's and what befell there.

"I saw the announcement of his concert in last Sunday's paper," she said. "Connie never reads the papers, or she would have seen it herself. What is he like now?"

"I don't want to use offensive language over the telephone," he answered.

He heard Madame Claire's laugh.

"Well, Noel, I think the whole thing is in your hands. You are the only one who can do anything with her. If I say anything she will only tell me I am tryng to rob her of her happiness.

You know how she talks—such sentimental nonsense!"

"But I don't see that I can do anything either. What can I do?"

"Of course you can do something. She knows well enough that Petrovitch is here to-day and gone to-morrow, while you're her nephew for life. Make her choose, Noel. It will appeal to her sense of the dramatic. You'll see. Make her choose."

"Him or me, you mean? I believe she'd choose him."

"I'm not so sure. But try it, anyway. You're so good about managing Connie."

"All right," he said. "I'll try."

"Oh, and Noel, if she chooses you, you might be magnanimous and offer to take her to his concert next week. I think you could safely do that. Good-by. I can't talk any more. Millie is just coming up to see me, and she mustn't hear this. Good-by and good luck!"

Noel remained for a thoughtful moment in the booth, and then went upstairs. Claire was quite right. It was the only chance.

He found his troublesome aunt waiting for him in her sitting room. She was humming softly and looking out of the window. His indignation grew as he looked at her.

"Connie," he said quietly. "About this Petrovitch business. I'm pretty angry about it, as you know perfectly well. I've made up my mind that you'll have to choose between me and that fellow, and choose here and now. You can't have us both. If you go out to dinner with Petrovitch to-morrow night or any other night, or have anything further to do with him, that's the end as far as I'm concerned. You won't see me again."

Connie came swiftly back from dreams of Petrovitch and seized Noel's arm.

"Noel! You can't mean that! You can't mean that you'd drop me—have nothing more to do with me? Oh, Noel!"

"I've said it and I mean it. It's up to you. If you have anything more to do with that bounder, I'll have nothing more to do with you. And that's flat."

She pleaded with him. He didn't understand Petrovitch. He didn't understand her. Ordinary rules didn't apply to him because he was a genius, nor to her because she loved him. If Noel were older——

That was more than he could bear.

"That'll do, Connie. I'm not a fool. I've been sorry for you because you were down on your luck; and anyway, I'm always sorry for people like you. And I'm fond of you, too. But if you're going to be so damn weak, and slop over with disgusting sentiment—well, I'm off."

Connie looked out of the window again.

"If you'll pull up and try to make something of your life, I'm with you. If not, I'm through."

"I can't give him up," moaned Connie. "I want to talk over old times with him, and hear him say that he loved me once. It means everything to me. I must talk to him, Noel!"

"All right. Then that's that. Well, I'm walking home. I feel I need a little air after all this. It's good-by then, Connie?"

He held out his hand. She turned and looked at him wildly.

"Noel, I never thought you could be so hard! You don't know how miserable you're making me!"

"There's Eric, too," he reminded her. "Don't forget he's got no love for Petrovitch. Don't forget Humphries was his friend. Eric's been pretty decent to you. As for . . . as for Claire! . . ."

Tears welled into her eyes. Noel, who, like many another man, found them undermining the foundations of his wrath, softened a little.

"Sleep on it, Connie," he said more kindly. "I'll give you until to-morrow to make up your mind. Ring me up in the morning and let me know what you've decided to do. So long!"

And he turned and left her.

CHAPTER XV

"Bless you, Claire," began Stephen's next letter, *"you make even my life worth living. Your letters are my one delight. All the same, we are poles apart in some things. You say, 'Oh, the joy of wanting nothing!' I would say, 'Oh, the misery of wanting nothing!' But fortunately there is one great want that keeps my old bones above ground, and that is the longing I have to see you and Judy and Eric again. Of course I was a fool not to marry. It may be fun to be a bachelor when you're young, but it's hell when you're old. I marvel at the number of women who face a life of single cussedness voluntarily. With me, there has been only one woman, and she holds this letter in her hands, as she has always held the writer's heart in her hands. But I've known plenty of women who would have made good wives, and perhaps given me Judys and Erics.*

"Yes, you are right; I took defeat badly. My advice, now, would always be to marry—as best one can. There is nearly always a compromise to be made. There would have been no com-

promise, on my part, had I married you. Therefore it was not to be, for the perfect thing is always out of reach. Don't tell me your marriage with Robert was perfect. Robert was my best friend and I knew his faults. But he made you happy, and that is the great thing. It ought to be carven on a man's tombstone, 'He made a woman happy.' Well, at least, they can carve on mine, 'He made no woman unhappy.'

"I am feeling much better to-day, so Miss McPherson is correspondingly gloomy. But she is a good, devoted soul, and has borne with me wonderfully, and I have settled something on her. Which brings me to your last letter. If Judy and that fellow want to marry, I will gladly settle something on Judy. Don't tell her, of course. People who really care for each other ought to be endowed if they can't afford to marry. I don't see the good of waiting till I'm dead. I will do what I should do if Judy were my daughter. You must let me know how things go. There's only my niece Monica to think of. She'll give what I leave her to the Church. I don't mind that, for though the Church has never done much for me—admittedly through my own fault—it has for other people.

"And that brings me to a subject I approach

with diffidence. Don't think me in my dotage, Claire, if I tell you that I have become interested in Spiritualism. I've been reading a great deal, and I have come to the unalterable conclusion that men like Crooks, Myers, Lodge and Doyle know what they are talking about. Some of us take our religion on trust. Others of us want to find out. Having floundered in a sea of agnosticism all my life long, I now begin to feel the ground beneath my feet. I got more out of the 'Vital Message' in an hour than I've got out of parsons in seventy years. I believe that if Spiritualism were rightly understood, it would fuse all religions and all sects. I need hardly tell you that the Spiritualism I mean does not depend on knockings and rappings, and the horrible fake-séances of the mercenary minded. Some day I must talk to you about this. I have said enough here, perhaps too much; but I wanted to tell you of the thing that has meant so much to me.

"If I continue as well as this I may come to London next month. London! Shall I know it, I wonder? It will not know me. But you will, and that is all I ask. "STEPHEN."

To this, Madame Claire made immediate reply:

"My dear Stephen,

"Your long letter was all too short for my liking. I feel you are really better, and I can't tell you how happy that makes me. About your coming I hardly dare to think. How good, how good it will be! There is a brass band of sorts playing under my window, and I wish it would stay and play all day. That shows how happy I am. And to that end, I am wondering whether it would be better to pay or to refrain from paying. I am uncritical enough at the moment to feel that any music is good music.

"How pleasant it would be if we could have appropriate music at all crucial, or difficult, or delightful moments in our lives! When one is first introduced to one's husband's relations, for instance. I think Chopin would help to tide us over that. In a bloodless battle with one's dressmaker over a bill, I would recommend Tchaikowsky, or Rimsky-Korsakov. For moments of deep feeling, for love, we would each, I imagine, choose something different. I think I would choose Bach, for Bach is too great for sentiment. As for dying—every one should die to music. I should think young people, for instance, would choose to drift into eternity upon the strains of the loveliest and latest waltz. At least I have often heard them

say they could die waltzing. There are bits of Wagner that I wouldn't mind dying to. You'll say dying is too serious a subject for jest. But I can't see that it's any more serious than living, which so many people are entirely frivolous about.

"Ah, no, Stephen, I don't think you are in your dotage. I too have read a good deal about Spiritualism, and I believe that what these men say is true. But I suppose I am one of those fortunate people who have faith, and that being so I had no need of proof. I don't know how my faith came to me. I have always had it, and so don't deserve any credit for it. The credit goes to people like you, who have had to struggle all their lives against unbelief. I believe, too, that so long as there is a diversity of creatures on this globe, so long will there be a diversity of religions. There is only one God, but the roads to the understanding of God are many.

"And so for you, and thousands like you, there is Crooks, with his laboratories and his cameras and his proofs. And for others there is Beauty. Hear what Tagore says:

> "'Thou art the sky and Thou art also the nest.
> O Thou Beautiful! How in the nest Thy love embraceth the soul with sweet sounds and color and fragrant odors!

Morning cometh there, bearing in her golden basket the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

And there cometh Evening, o'er lonely meadows deserted of the herds, by trackless ways, carrying in her golden pitcher cool draughts of peace from the ocean-calms of the west.

But where Thine infinite sky spreadeth for the soul to take her flight, a stainless white radiance reigneth; wherein is neither day nor night, nor form nor color, nor ever any word.'

"And for others again, there is simply—

"'I am the Resurrection and the Life. . . .'

"Write again soon. I long to know how you are progressing.

"Yours as ever,

"CLAIRE."

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Noel woke, the morning after his ultimatum to Connie, he was at once aware that something was to make that day different from other days, but for a moment he couldn't remember what that something was. Then, as the happenings of the previous day came back to him, he said to himself, "Connie and Petrovitch," and sprang out of bed. He dressed quickly—for he had reduced the business of dressing himself with one hand to an exact science—and knocked on Judy's door. He heard her call, "Come in if it's Noel," and obeyed. Judy was standing before her mirror, brushing her brown hair. Her bright red silk dressing gown made a lovely splash of color in the restrained little room.

"What are you up so early for?" she asked. "Something on your conscience, old boy?"

"Not on mine," he assured her. "Mind if I smoke? I bet you often do before breakfast."

"Never. You may though. You've evidently got something to tell me. Even if I am the spinster type, I understand the workings of the male mind. What's up?"

"It's about Connie," he began; then broke off to say, "One of these days I'll buy you a comfortable chair. This one's got a back like a pew in a Quaker meetinghouse. However—you know yesterday was Connie's birthday?"

"Of course I know. Didn't I send her a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley? Lilies for purity. Well, what about it?"

"Perhaps you are also aware that she asked me to lunch at Claridge's. Before we'd been there ten minutes, who do you suppose came in and sat at a table almost next to ours?"

"Chiozzi?"

"Guess again."

"Noel, you know I hate these guessing games. Freeman? Oh, no, he's dead. It was some one to do with Connie, I suppose. Petrovitch, then?"

"No other. The dirty dog!"

"The plot thickens!" exclaimed Judy. "What happened then?"

"Connie saw him, and nearly swooned for joy. And then if you please, the great brute saw her and beckoned. Beckoned, do you hear? And she'd have gone to him if I'd let her."

"How beastly!"

"I talked to her gently but firmly, but she was up in the air. We got through lunch somehow, and then I tried to persuade her to get out before he could speak to her. But she wouldn't budge. He didn't move either until he'd almost finished feeding. Then he came to our table. I wish you could have seen Connie registering soulfulness. I can tell you, a close-up of both of them would have been pleasing to a screen audience. After twenty years the villain sees the heroine again. Tableau!"

"Yes. Well, go on."

"We exchanged a pleasantry or two, and then he commanded Connie to dine with him to-night. Connie of course was writhing on the mat for pure joy, and barking short, happy barks. She licked his hand and meekly indicated that his lightest wish was her law. Then we went. I wasn't feeling full of love for human nature by that time, I can tell you. I didn't know what to do, so I rang up Claire and she advised me to issue an ultimatum. Which I did. I said that if she spoke to Petrovitch again, all was over between us. Sob stuff from Connie. I really was sorry for her. In the end I told her to sleep on it, and to ring me up in the morning. Then I left her. Do you think I did right?"

Judy considered.

"It would half kill her not to see you again. She adores you, you know. But I think Claire was right. If that won't pull her up, nothing will. What do you think she'll do?"

"Oh, she'll dine with Petrovitch, all right," prophesied Noel gloomily. "Hang it all! I thought she'd learned something. I didn't expect her to change her nature all at once, but I did think she'd begun to see the silliness of that sort of behavior."

"The way of the reformer is hard," said his sister.

"Oh, I'm not trying to reform her. I only wanted to show her that she'd get more out of life if she tried another tack. And I believe she was beginning to see it, too. If only that—swine hadn't come along!——"

"Well, stick to your guns," advised Judy. "I have a feeling that she'll come round. But, Noel, if she doesn't come round?——"

"Exactly. If she doesn't, ought I to keep my threat? After all, perhaps I've no right . . . I suppose it's difficult . . . if I thought it would cure her to see him a few times, I'd let her. But he's her hero for life, spots and all."

"Spots?" Judy paused with upraised arms.

"Any number of 'em. On his clothes. A dirty feeder. As for his hair! . . ."

"Isn't it queer, Noel? That sort of thing? I can't understand it, can you?"

"I don't want to," he said shortly. "I've thought of kidnapping Connie and shutting her up somewhere till he goes. He'll only be here a week or so. I saw it in the paper last night."

Judy laughed as she pinned her hair into place.

"Poor old Connie! She's sure to do the wrong thing, I suppose. She always has. But there's just a chance. She's so fond of you."

"I'm rather fond of her. She's a good sort, really, under all this Camille business. She doesn't understand you though."

"I can bear that," replied his sister.

"It's a funny thing," remarked Noel, remembering her comments on the subject of Judy and Chip, "but I believe that if Connie hadn't been . . . what she is . . . she'd have been a terribly conventional woman. I think she's a sort of Millie-gone-wrong."

This amused Judy greatly.

"If only mother could hear you say that!" she said.

"What's on to-night?" he asked. "Anything doing here?"

"Have you forgotten? Major Crosby's coming to dinner, and we promised to give him a dancing lesson."

"Chip! So he is! This bother about Connie put it out of my head for the moment. What shall I do if she asks me to take her out to dinner? As she may do, if she decides not to see Petrovitch."

"Then I suppose you must take her."

"We might dine early and come here after," he suggested. "Would mother object, do you think?"

"You'd better ask her," she said. "Mother has only seen her once since she came back, and then she went to her hotel heavily veiled."

Noel nodded appreciatively.

"Well, I'll ask her. There's no harm in Connie, poor old thing. Will Gordon be home?"

"Yes. Helen's dining here too. I didn't want her a bit to-night. She's so—patronizing. Not to me, but to strangers. And Chip will be shyer than ever."

"Well, remember," Noel cautioned her, "Chip's *my* friend. We met at the Club. It was only a few yards away, so that isn't much of a fib. That's what I've given out."

"Very well," said Judy. "I'm rather dreading to-night, really. I'd like to have kept Chip to ourselves, if we could. But I suppose it wouldn't have done."

The gong boomed loudly, and Judy flew to get a dress out of her wardrobe

When they met at breakfast a few minutes later, they said good morning as though they hadn't seen each other before. In the midst of their family, the brother and sister had from childhood maintained a sort of Secret Society. Their two minds, critical and inquiring from the first, had early found themselves in tune with each other and out of tune with the rest. When Judy looked back on her childhood and girlhood, it always seemed to her to be streaked with light and dark spots. The light spots were Noel's vacations, and the times when they were together, and the dark spots were the long school terms, and—darkest spot of all—his absence at the war. But even as a child the joy of having him with her was always faintly shadowed by the fear of some day not having him. For years she had said to herself:

"If I could only love some one else as much as I do Noel, then fate would have a choice of two marks."

And if the other members of the family objected to the brother and sister's marked preference for each other's society, they kept it to themselves remarkably well.

The Pendletons always had family prayers. Mrs. Pendleton insisted on them less from conviction than for the reason that all the other Pendletons had them, and she believed they had a good effect on the servants. So the entire household assembled in the dining room at a quarter to nine, and if any one was late, he or she was waited for. This morning Gordon was late, but when he was the offender, nothing was said.

Mr. Pendleton officiated. He was a little man, with what the Pendletons chose to call a handsome nose. Most people thought it merely large. His face barely escaped being intellectual, but something narrow about the forehead and peevish about the mouth, spoiled the effect. Noel looked the most like him, but Noel's forehead and mouth had what his father's lacked. Fortunately he took after his mother in the matter of height, for Millie was a good five inches taller than her husband. In her large, charmless way she was handsome, and had regular and uninteresting features. It was difficult to see in Judy the least trace of likeness to either of her parents, while Gordon, on the contrary, was the image of his mother, and she idolized him. She was prepared, too, to find in Helen, when she became his wife, all that she found lacking in Judy.

Prayers over, breakfast immediately followed. It was usually a quiet meal, enlivened only by excursions after food, and the rustle of newspapers. But this morning there was an uncommon amount of talk. It went as follows:

Mr. Pendleton: "Gordon, I hope you haven't forgotten you are lunching with Sir William today at his club."

Gordon: "No, father. I hadn't forgotten. Won't you be there too?"

Mr. Pendleton: "Unfortunately, it is not possible. I have a very trying day ahead of me." (Mr. Pendleton was a barrister, but his large income made work less a necessity than a hobby.)

Millie: "I shall be glad when the summer comes, John, and you can take a holiday. By the way, I wish you'd all make up your minds where you want to go this year."

Noel: "Must we decide six months ahead?"

Millie: "We always have done so. I like to know in good time what I'm going to do. We could go abroad, I suppose, but your father thinks we ought to go to Scotland as usual."

Judy: "Why can't we all go where we like? Must we have a holiday en masse?"

Mr. Pendleton: "You can hardly speak of a small party of five as going 'en masse.' "

Gordon: "I won't be one of the party, so it's only four. You know, Mother, Helen and I will be at Ottway Castle for July and August."

Millie: "Of course, dear. I know you are provided for. It's Judy and Noel I was thinking of."

Judy: "But why don't you and father go to Scotland, and let Noel and me go somewhere else —Devon or Cornwall for a change. It's so dull doing the same thing every year."

Mr. Pendleton: "I think we will all go together as usual."

(Silence.)

Judy: "Then why ask us to make up our minds where we want to go?"

Mr. Pendleton: "Your mother asked. Personally, I am convinced that Scotland is the most bracing."

Judy: "I really don't feel I want to be braced. Do you, Noel?"

Noel: "I loathe bracing places."

Mr. Pendleton: "Then let us all go to Cornwall."

Millie: "I find Cornwall so relaxing."

Judy: "I think I'd like just to stay in Sussex with Claire."

Mr. Pendleton: "You know, Judy, I dislike very much hearing you speak of your grandmother as Claire."

Judy: "Sorry, father. I forgot."

(Silence.)

Noel: "By the way, mother, I've got rather a good idea. I may be taking Con—Aunt Connie out to dinner to-night. Suppose I bring her here afterwards? It would cheer her up a lot. I know she likes seeing people dance. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

Gordon: "Noel, you really are a bit of an ass sometimes! You know Helen's coming here to-night. How could I possibly ask her to meet Aunt Connie?"

Noel: "Why not?"

Gordon: "If you don't know why not, you ought to."

Noel: "Chuck it, Gordon! Don't be such a prig. What about Helen's friend, Oriana Temple? If Connie can teach her anything!——"

Gordon: "Please leave Helen and her friends out of the discussion."

Noel: "Right. But you brought her in. Anyhow, I asked mother. Mother, you don't mind if Connie comes here to-night, do you? After all, she's your sister, and it would be doing her a kindness."

Millie: "Gordon is quite right, Noel. There is no reason why we should inflict our family skeleton on Helen. If Connie is an unhappy woman, it's entirely her own fault. She has forfeited the right to be with decent people. Don't you agree with me, John?"

Mr. Pendleton (unexpectedly): "I think, my dear, that if we can help Connie, we ought to do so. I feel she has a claim upon us, and as Christian people we have no right to ignore it. Is isn't as though the children were growing up; and after all, Gordon, Helen is marrying into our family."

Noel: "Good for you, dad!"

Gordon: "Let her come by all means, Helen and I will dine here another night."

Millie: "It's very tiresome of you, Noel, to upset everything like this. And while we're on the subject of Aunt Connie, I want to say that I don't mind your being polite to her, but I do not like your going about with her so much. If you had to ask her here, some other night would have done as well. I'm certain your friend Major Crosby won't want to meet her."

Noel: "He won't mind. Besides, he doesn't know anything about her. And I had a particular reason for wanting to bring her to-night."

Gordon: "That's settled, then. Helen and I will dine here to-morrow night, mother."

Judy and Noel were amazed at the stand their father had taken.

"I never thought dad had it in him," Noel said later.

"Influence of morning prayers," answered Judy. "Father's always nicest just after prayers."

At ten o'clock the maid sought out Noel with the message that Countess Chiozzi was on the telephone and would like to speak to him.

"I lose, I'll bet," said Noel to Judy as he left the room.

"Hello, Connie!" he began cheerfully. "How's my aunt this morning? Feeling better? Good! I was rather a beast yesterday, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were," a rather dejected voice replied. "I hardly slept a wink all night. Noel, it's . . . it's breaking my heart, but I know I can't give *you* up. There's no use. . . . I can't."

"Right you are! You don't have to. Tell you what—we'll go for a bean-o to-night. I'll dine you at a new place I wot of, and then I'll bring you back here. There'll be just the family, and

Major Crosby, and perhaps one or two others. Oh, and I'll teach you to dance. What do you say? Nothing like dancing to keep you young."

Connie hesitated, then said rather dubiously:

"But nobody wants me there. Does Millie——"

"Just you come along and see. I'll call for you at seven. Make yourself beautiful. The gray chiffon, with pearls—what?"

"Oh, that? Very well. Noel, I shall be dreadfully nervous."

"Nervous! Nonsense, Countess! Pull up your socks. And, by the way, Connie, a light hand with the make-up. I'll inspect you at seven. And —oh, one thing more. How would you like me to take you to What's-His-Name's concert next Friday? You can feast your eyes and ears on him then."

"You *are* generous, Noel! It would mean everything to me."

"I'll get seats, then. You're a sport, Connie. So long!"

He left the telephone, whistling jubilantly, and went to tell Judy the news. Then he told his mother, who was less pleased.

"It's a piece of impertinence, her coming to London at all. I don't know what your grandmother could have been thinking of. I won't object to her coming this once, but it mustn't happen again. We owe it to Gordon to keep her in the background."

Noel left it at that. He never argued with his mother.

Gordon had reckoned without his Helen, who prided herself on being modern. When he told her he would rather she dined there the following night, she wanted to know the reason.

"Not that beautiful Mrs. Humphries who ran off with Petrovitch? I'd quite forgotten she was your aunt. What nonsense, Gordon! Of course I shall come. As if her past made the slightest difference to me! I hear she's still quite lovely."

Gordon reported this new development to his mother in his own way.

"Helen's been awfully nice about it," Millie told her husband later. "She told Gordon she didn't mind meeting Connie at all, and that as she was marrying into the family she intended taking the rough with the smooth. She's such a sensible girl!"

CHAPTER XVII

JUDY had neither seen nor heard from Major Crosby since the day they had tea together at Madame Claire's. She had written him a note to thank him for his flowers, the sending of which had both pleased and touched her. Knowing his poverty and his reserve, she read into his gift, more, perhaps, than he had intended she should. Chip looked upon the sending of flowers as the natural tribute to be paid to any charming woman, and imagined in his simplicity, that she must receive very many such gifts. She guessed this, but at the same time she also guessed that never before in his life, probably, had he sent flowers to a woman. Pink roses, too. . . .

She wondered about him a good deal—wondered what he did with himself evenings, and where and how he spent his Sundays. Like Madame Claire, she felt that Chip was a man not marked for success, but at least she was determined that, whatever happened, his life should be less empty and colorless because of that accident in the fog.

On the whole, however, she dreaded the evening for him. She felt that he would be neither amused nor benefited by it. She knew she would get little help from her mother, and as for Gordon and Helen, they never bothered with people unless they mattered.

Once more, Helen had not been reckoned with. She sat next to Chip at table, and soon saw that he had eyes only for her future sister-in-law—and a tongue only for her too, it seemed. Helen decided to be bored at first, but as she was slightly annoyed with Gordon, who sat on her left, she presently turned her batteries full on the surprised Chip, who had no idea he was neglecting his neighbor. Helen could be very charming when the spirit moved her. After inviting him to her house to meet a writer whose work he admired, she went on to what she had learned was his chief interest. That she lowered her voice to discuss.

"A tremendously important subject . . . we moderns want to know . . . made rather a study of these things myself . . . esoteric beliefs . . ." were scraps that Judy's ears couldn't ignore. And later, "I do wish we'd met before. Why is it that people who do things that are worth while are always so hard to get at? One has to hunt them out of their holes, as," she laughed, "I mean to hunt you."

Chip made some appropriate answer to this, and Helen was about to continue her attack when Millie cut in with:

"Is it the Crosbys of Crosby Steynes, or the Crosbys of Middle Regis you're related to, Major Crosby? They're both such delightful people."

And Chip was lost to the rest of the table for a good ten minutes while he and Millie dived together into a sea of relationships. At the end of it, Millie came to the surface with nothing better in the way of a catch than some entirely unclassified Crosbys who lived somewhere near Aberdeen. The ladies then departed to the drawing-room.

Left alone with Mr. Pendleton, Gordon and a friend of his, a Captain Stevens from the Foreign Office, Chip did some classifying on his own account. Gordon, he decided, was a young man who had much to learn, but the chances were that he would never learn it. He liked Mr. Pendleton, who was determined to be a pleasant host. As for Captain Stevens, he thought him a nice fellow, in spite of his admission that he spent his nights dancing. He wondered at first if perhaps

Judy—but five minutes' conversation with the young man convinced him that he wasn't Judy's sort. He missed Noel, with his easy manners, and his human touch.

When they went up to the drawing-room, which was cleared for dancing, he went straight to Judy, and sat beside her on a settee, thus defeating Captain Stevens, who had intended doing the same thing.

"Is this where I begin?" asked Chip, looking fearfully at the satiny floor.

"I don't know," said Judy. "I'm wondering that myself. Suppose we let the young people dance to-night?" She laughed. "Somehow I haven't the heart to make you. I'm afraid you'll hate it, after all, and I'm not a bit in the mood for it myself."

"I don't want you to think me a coward," Chip told her, "but I'd be ever so much happier if I could stay just where I am. Perhaps I could learn something by watching Captain Stevens. I expect he dances like a wave of the sea."

"He's marvelous," agreed Judy. "Hundreds of maidens have tried to marry him for his dancing, but I understand he's never yet met his equal and won't wed until he does."

Chip shook his head.

"I feel like Rip Van Winkle. I believe several generations have gone by without my noticing it. But I've made up my mind to learn something about this one. When do your brother and Miss Dane expect to be married?"

"In June. How do you like Helen?"

"She was very kind. I shouldn't say it, perhaps, but wasn't there something of the Lady Bountiful about it all?"

Judy laughed.

"Helen likes patronizing the arts. The arts are very fashionable just now in her set. I like Helen, really. If only she and her friends weren't so fond of posing—and they find new poses every year—one would like them better. But it isn't as if Noel were marrying her. Gordon has always seemed to belong to other people's families more than to his own, and now of course he'll be entirely absorbed by Lord Ottway's, and their friends and relations."

"He's not a bit like your brother Noel. I think Noel is one of the most attractive young men I ever met. He has such a way of making one feel his friend at once."

"Of course there's no one like him," said Judy, delighted at this praise, "but Gordon's the one who'll succeed."

"Ah, very likely. Success. . . . I wonder which is worse; to ignore it, or to bow down to it? I've ignored it all my life. I've never thought about it. And now I've suddenly discovered that I want it. Yes, I want it badly. And I'm wondering if it's too late . . . if it won't, perhaps, ignore me, now?"

His eyes met hers, frankly. What he meant was that without success he felt he could not enjoy her friendship. At least he thought he meant that. Judy thought he meant something quite different.

Then Noel came in with Connie, and that ended their talk for the present. Connie was looking wonderfully young and extremely handsome, and was no more made up than was permissible. Her lovely gray gown and her triple row of pearls—Morton Freeman's gift—became her to perfection. She looked a different woman from the painted, haggard creature Eric had first seen in Paris. Millie's greeting was formal, while Mr. Pendleton's—he had expected something so very much worse—was almost effusive. A look from Millie, however, soon put him in his place, which, for the rest of the evening, was the smoking room. Chip was talking to Noel, and Judy was just beginning to feel that the evening might not be a fiasco after all, when Helen, assured and smiling, bore down upon Chip.

"Here's good dancing material, unless I'm much mistaken," she said. "Any one who appreciates poetry must have a sense of rhythm, and if you have that, you can dance." So she led him protesting helplessly, to the floor.

"Bother Helen," said Judy under her breath. "If he ever did learn to dance, I intended teaching him myself." She felt a little ruffled, although she realized perfectly that Helen's attentions to Chip were probably occasioned by some little tiff with Gordon.

As she danced with Captain Stevens, she watched Chip, and saw that he was acquitting himself creditably. But it seemed to her all wrong that he should be dancing at all. It didn't suit him. He wasn't a dancing man and never would be. She was glad of it. There were plenty of Captain Stevens' sort about. She suddenly felt a distaste for that form of amusement. In the midst of the moving couples, and the raucous voice of the gramophone, a wave of distaste and boredom came over her. What was she doing with her life? Nothing. It was empty, useless, senseless. She wasn't wanted anywhere. And now she was trying to drag Chip into that emptiness. To what end? To be told by Helen how to point his toes? Better have left him with his books. He was too good for that sort of thing.

If Chip wanted her, she would marry him. She liked everything about him—even his oddly cut evening clothes, that reminded her of Du Maurier's drawings. She caught his eyes just then, and there was a rather pleading look in them. He evidently wasn't enjoying his lesson. Well, the gramophone would run down in a minute, and then they could all stop. She hadn't spoken a word to Captain Stevens, who, fortunately, thought she was so thrilled by the perfection of his dancing that she didn't want to spoil a perfect moment by speaking.

She tried to picture herself married to Chip. It would mean managing on nothing a year in that tiny flat, or one like it. To-night she was sure she wouldn't mind. It would take them months—years perhaps, to know each other well. It would be such fun finding out. And being modern and willing to face facts, she tried to picture herself wheeling a perambulator about Campden Hill on the nurse's day out. By that time Chip would have had a great success with his book on religions or some other book, and they would have a house. Yes, poverty and all, if Chip wanted her, she would marry him. Only Noel was right. She would have to be bold. . . .

The gramophone ran down and the dancing stopped. Captain Stevens, full of enthusiasm, exclaimed:

"That was glorious! We must have another fox-trot." And went to put on another record.

Judy made her way to where Connie was sitting, and on hearing her say she had not yet met Helen, she introduced them. Helen, who had already decided she wouldn't be above asking Connie's advice about her trousseau, sat beside her and talked about Cannes and Monte Carlo, while Gordon, who had greeted his aunt with extreme coldness, stood a few feet away and impersonated a young man in the sulks. Judy was about to go to him, when the maid appeared in the doorway, and Judy, seeing that she had something to say to her, crossed the room.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Judy," said the maid. "It's Dawson, and she wants to speak to you most particularly, Miss."

"Dawson!" exclaimed Judy. "I hope it doesn't mean . . ." but without finishing her sentence she ran to the telephone, which was downstairs.

"Is that you, Miss Judy?" asked Dawson. "We're a little upset here to-night. A telegram came from Miss McPherson about Mr. de Lisle, and it seems the poor gentleman's quite ill, and wants to see you or Mr. Eric. We've rung up Mr. Eric, and he says he can't possibly get away this week. So we wondered if you could go, Miss. It would mean leaving at once, Miss Judy."

Judy didn't hesitate.

"Of course I'll go. Tell Madame Claire I'll go to-morrow. Is she in bed?"

"She is, Miss. The telegram should have come two hours ago, but it was sent to the wrong room. We do think, Miss, that it would be better in a way for Mr. Eric to go, but we don't like to take any risks, in case the old gentleman's very ill indeed. And it's out of the question for us to go ourselves, Miss."

"But of course I'll go!" Judy repeated. "Dawson, tell Madame Claire not to worry, and that I'll be off the very minute I can get a passport. I'm so sorry for poor old Mr. de Lisle. Is Madame Claire very much upset?"

"Well, not what you'd call upset," Dawson replied. "We do keep calm, Miss, whatever happens. But it is sad, the time being so near when he hoped to come to England."

"He'll come yet, I feel sure. I'll send a wire to-morrow to say I'm leaving. I'll probably come in the morning for a minute to say good-by. Give Madame Claire my love, and tell her the trip will be a godsend to me."

She went straight to her mother with the news. Millie was thoroughly annoyed.

"I think your grandmother has taken leave of her senses," she said. "First Connie and now this. You can't possibly go to Cannes alone."

"Mother!" Judy exclaimed. "Please don't treat me as though I were a child or an imbecile. You know perfectly well I can go—and must go. If you and father won't help me, Claire will pay my expenses. I know she'll offer to, anyway."

"You had better speak to your father," said Millie with chilling disapproval.

It was undoubtedly one of Mr. Pendleton's best days. He looked almost indulgently at his handsome, excited daughter, and said:

"Well, Judith, I can see you're bent on going. I suppose you'll find friends there. You might arrange to come back with some of them. My only fear is that the old man will die, and that would be very awkward for you. They make a considerable to-do in France, when people die. Still, I suppose if your grandmother wants it . . ."

Considerably later, she found herself alone with Chip again. He had been danced with twice by Helen, and felt that he had earned a respite.

"How long do you think you'll be gone?" he asked, on hearing the news.

"I suppose that depends on Mr. de Lisle."

"Is he Stephen de Lisle? The man who was . . . what was it? . . . Home Secretary, I think. A good many years ago. And I seem to remember some tremendous quarrel, with the then Prime Minister. A man with a very fine head. I remember his pictures quite well."

"That's Old Stephen. He was a great, great friend of mine when I was seven, and I haven't seen him since. But he's always been in love with Madame Claire—since before she married my grandfather. People of their generation did that sort of thing—loved for a lifetime. I wonder why nobody does now?"

"Are you sure they don't?" he asked.

"Certain of it. The thing to do nowadays is to console oneself as quickly as possible. And I think there is a good deal of prejudice against wasting lives, and wasted lives. And rightly, too, I suppose." Then, changing the subject: "I'll be away for several weeks, and I wish you'd write to me and let me know if the headaches have stopped, and how you're getting on, generally. I shall be at the Riviera Hotel, in Cannes, where Old Stephen is."

"May I write? But I'm afraid you'll find my letters very dull. I see so few people. I suppose," he added, "I ought to have had more to do with people. Only, when a man has nothing whatever to offer, he is apt to retire into his shell. I did, and I should have remained there, if it hadn't been for you. . . ."

"Promise me, then," she said, looking at him seriously, "that you won't slip back into it again the moment my back is turned. I'd like you to see something of Madame Claire, and of Noel. They both like you, you know, and will want to see you. Will you promise me that?"

"I'll do anything you think is good for me," he answered, smiling. Then he too looked serious.

"Miss Pendleton, you don't know what it means to a man to feel himself tied by the lack of money. I suppose another man in my place would have found some way of making it. No doubt I should have chucked writing long ago, or tried to write something more lucrative than a book on religion. But, on the other hand, should I? If I have written something of any value, if the book is well received, I shall feel justified in having spent so many years on it. If it isn't? Well, I don't know.

I don't think I'd have the heart to launch out into business, at forty-four. But I hardly expect you to understand that. You're young and happy. You have everything in front of you."

"Happy?" asked Judy. "Did you say happy?"

He looked quickly at her.

"Aren't you?"

She met his eyes squarely.

"If a rat in a trap or a squirrel in a cage is happy, then perhaps I am. I hate the life I'm living. Yes, I do, I hate it. If it weren't for Noel and Madame Claire, I'd—I don't know what I'd do. Something pretty desperate, just to get away from it."

He sat looking at her as if he couldn't trust his own senses. She couldn't be serious.

"You're a sentimentalist," she went on. "You believe what you like to believe. I suppose you've imagined all sorts of pretty things about me. I assure you, that rather than go on living as I've been living, I'd change places with the between-maid in our kitchen. It wasn't so bad during the war. I did nursing then. But now, because I'm the only daughter, mother and father won't hear of my taking up any sort of work. I go once a week to Bermondsy to teach a class of girls hat-trimming, and even that's frowned upon because I once got measles there. No, I'm expected to sit with folded hands until some young man comes along and marries me. Isn't it extraordinary, in this day and age?"

Chip was still speechless.

"And I'll go on like this till I die, I suppose, or marry somebody out of sheer boredom. And I keep asking myself what I ought to do. What would some one else do in my place? Should I simply walk out of the house, and try to live my own life? But where would I go, and what would I do? I've no training except nursing, and I should hate ordinary, peace-time nursing. And would it be fair to my family, who after all have spent a great deal of money on me? And each year I think, 'Next year is sure to be different,' but it isn't. It's exactly the same, or worse, and I'm a year older and have accomplished nothing. If it had been my lot to live in the country, I expect I would have hunted, or perhaps kept a lot of dogs, or looked after a garden. But as it is . . ."

She broke off. Captain Stevens descended on them to ask her to dance again, but she shook her head.

"I'm not a bit in the mood for it to-night.

Look, the Winslow girls have just come. They're heavenly dancers."

Captain Stevens went, after a curious glance at Chip. Who was the fellow in the antiquated evening clothes, who was so quiet at dinner? A "oner" with the ladies, at any rate.

Judy turned once more to Chip.

"I've been perfectly beastly," she said. "But I feel better for it. And if I've destroyed a lot of your illusions, I'm sorry, but at least you know more of Judy Pendleton than you did."

"What you have told me," he said slowly, "has made me feel very sad, for your sake. I was so sure you were happy. But for my own sake . . . I don't know . . . I think it has made you seem less terribly remote. I felt before that we were in different hemispheres. Now . . . well, we at least inhabit the same imperfect planet. And it's a wonderful thing for me to know any one like you. To-night has been . . ."

"I'm so glad if you haven't minded it. I was afraid you'd hate it, or at least be bored."

"Bored?" He smiled.

"I suppose I must have made friends when I was young," he went on. "I remember imagining myself in love once or twice, and I was exactly like any other young man, no doubt. Then I went out to South Africa, and after the war I came home to find my mother dead. I was very ill for a long time, and I got out of the habit of seeing people. Then, when my health improved, I began to write. Articles; all sorts of things. Then I was sent out to India to join my regiment, and while I was there I began the book on religions, but for some years I hardly did more than make a beginning. But at last I got so interested in it that when I returned from India I left the army and went to live in a lonely cottage in Cornwall that belonged to my mother. I suppose I allowed the book to become an obsession, as Lady Gregory said, for I spent weeks—months sometimes—without seeing a soul except the village people, and Major Stroud now and then. Then the war came, and until 1919 I was in France. When I came home, I took the flat in Campden Hill. The night . . . the night of the accident, Major Stroud had dragged me out to dine at his club. I remember he had been lecturing me for being such a hermit."

"And rightly," said Judy.

"Still, I should have gone on being a hermit, if you hadn't come just when you did." He paused. "And yet there are people who deny that there's a benevolent Deity who orders our lives."

Captain Stevens might have said that and meant nothing by it, and if he had said it, Judy would have had a retort ready. But coming from Chip, it could not be treated so lightly. How much, she wondered, did he mean? Oh, he meant what he said, of course, but how much did he mean her to understand by it? And then she realized that had he meant to express more than an appreciation of her friendship, he could never have said it so easily.

"Let's hope your Deity will take an interest in the book," she said, and then was suddenly aware that she had spent the greater part of the evening talking to Chip. She looked about her. Helen and Gordon were dancing. Connie had boldly taken the floor with Noel a few minutes previously, but was now watching him dance with one of the Winslow girls, and Captain Stevens was dancing with the other. Millie was nowhere to be seen. Not for a moment must Connie be allowed to regret that she hadn't dined with Petrovitch.

"Come and help me amuse my aunt," said Judy. Then, with a sparkle in her eyes, "And if you can think of any pretty speeches to make her such as you have just made me, so much the better."

CHAPTER XVIII

"It won't be wildly gay," said Noel as he saw Judy off at Victoria Station two days later, "but you'll have sun and a change of scene. Anyhow, I have a pretty good hunch that the old boy's going to get better."

Judy was talking to him through the window, feeling like anybody in the world but Judy Pendleton. She, of all people, to be going to Cannes; and alone! Well, nothing ever happened but the unexpected, and this was the unexpected in one of its pleasantest forms. And if only Noel should prove to be right about his "hunch"! . . .

"He must get better! I should so love to see him and Claire hobnobbing together. Write to me at least every other day, won't you? And tell me all about Connie and Petrovitch—only I hope there won't be much to tell—and Eric and Louise, and——"

"Anything else?"

"Yes," she said. "Find out what the family thought of Chip. I'm longing to know."

As the train moved off, he walked beside it for a few feet.

"Oh, by the way, I think I've got a job."

"Noel! Why didn't you tell me sooner? What is it? Quick!"

"I'll write," he called out. "Not positive yet. Good-by!"

"It's something that means going away," thought Judy, as she arranged herself and her belongings. "That's why he wouldn't tell me sooner."

The thought of it sent her spirits down considerably, but she made up her mind not to borrow trouble. If he hadn't spoken of it before, it was because he wasn't sure. Life without Noel would be . . . no, it didn't bear thinking of. Time enough to worry when she heard from him. Wasn't she on her way to the Riviera, for the first time? The word had always been a magical one, to her. It meant color, warmth, life. She would see the Mediterranean. And it was her first adventure. Mr. Pendleton had most unexpectedly presented her with fifty pounds, telling her to buy herself some dresses in Cannes. It was very nearly a fortune. Madame Claire herself was paying for the trip, and had given her a little money to gamble with.

"For of course you must play," she had said. "You're sure to find friends there; and even if Stephen dies—which Heaven forbid!—I don't see why you shouldn't stay on for a little and enjoy yourself."

The next day the sight of Marseilles, golden in the sunshine, made her forget every trouble, past and to come. She had an impression of old houses with greeny-blue shutters, and bare plane trees, the twisted limbs of which looked white and strange in the sunlight. And beyond, the incredibly blue water. She could hardly keep her delight to herself as the train wound its leisurely way along the lovely, broken coast. She gloried in the greeny-gray of the olive trees, in the rich, red earth, in the burning blue of sea and sky.

"I should like to live here," she thought, as they passed some blue-shuttered house behind its vines and its fig trees. Or, "no, here!" as another even more alluring showed itself among its terraced olive groves. She thought, with commiseration, of her parents who might have been there too had they cared to make the effort, stuffily going their rounds— "It isn't as though they couldn't afford it," she said to herself. "I believe it's because they want to save for Gordon."

Miss McPherson, a little, calm, thin-lipped

Scotch woman, met her at the station in Cannes. She seemed glad, in her quiet, professional way, to see Judy, and as they drove to the hotel in the omnibus, she told her about Stephen.

"It was a slight stroke," she explained, "but we won't be calling it that because Mr. de Lisle doesn't know, or doesn't want to know. He will have it that it was an attack of some sort. But he's much better to-day, and in a fortnight or so, he'll be as well as he was before. Of course that isn't saying that he'll be enjoying robust health."

"Does that mean that he can never come to London?" Judy asked.

"Oh, dear me, no, I wouldn't say that. You'll do him good. And I think he's been here long enough." Then she added with a twinkle in her little gray eyes:

"He was just determined to see you or Colonel Gregory. Between you and me, Miss Pendleton, my poor old patient's very bored here."

Judy nodded.

"I see," she said. "I'm more than ever glad that I came. I'm thankful to hear he's no worse; I was afraid of—something really desperate. We must amuse him somehow. Doesn't he ever go motoring?"

The little nurse shook her head.

"He says it's so dull with just him and me. The poor old gentleman should have had a family. It's dreadful for him being alone. It just takes all the heart out of him."

"Well, I've come to be the family," said Judy. "Oh, what wonderful palms!"

They turned into a driveway lined with them, and up to the hotel. It was an imposing building, dazzling in fresh white paint; and glossy orange trees, heavy with ripe fruit, stood on either side of the entrance.

"Mr. de Lisle's still in bed, of course," Miss McPherson told her, "but you may see him after lunch. And I've promised him he may go out with you in a day or two. In a bath-chair, at first."

She left Judy to unpack, and have her lunch, and hurried back to her patient.

"I shall get on with her," Judy said to herself, "she's human."

At about half-past two she knocked at Stephen's door.

Miss McPherson had told her that he still complained of numbness in his legs, so she was prepared for the sight of the long, gaunt figure stretched out so inertly on a bed near the window. His head was turned her way, and as he held out a long arm, a pair of searching, sunken eyes met hers.

"Judy! Good girl, good girl!" he cried. "I meant to turn my face to the wall if you didn't come. Miss McPherson, place her chair a little nearer. That's it. Judy, Judy!"

"You're exactly the same 'Old Stephen' I remember," said Judy, unexpectedly moved at this meeting, "only gray instead of iron-gray." It was silly to feel tearful. "Do—do I look a bit as you thought I'd look?"

He answered in a lower voice, still holding her hand in a grip of surprising strength:

"You're like your grandmother, thank God! I prayed that you might be. It's the eyes, I think —yes, it's the eyes and expression. I can build her up, around your eyes. You always promised to be a little like her. Ah, my dear, my dear, it was good of you to come!"

"Good of me! You little know what you saved me from!"

"Saved you from?"

"Yes. You—I was simply desperate. I'd begun to hate myself and every one else, except Madame Claire and Noel."

"Madame Claire," he repeated. "Yes, I like that. And what then?"

"I was longing to get away. You see I haven't been out of England since I was sixteen. Except to Scotland, and I don't count that. And I felt—stale. You've saved my life, I think, and now you say I'm going to save yours. . . . We'll have a wonderful time, won't we, Miss McPherson?"

"It will be very nice," said she.

"Miss McPherson tells me you'll be out in a day or two," Judy went on. "I'm looking forward to the day when we can go motoring. There must be glorious trips to be taken."

He turned his eyes toward his nurse.

"What else did you tell her?" he demanded.

"Everything I thought necessary." She pressed her lips together but her eyes smiled.

"I thought you were Scotch enough to keep a secret."

"I can keep them when I choose."

"Judy," Stephen said, "I'm not as bad as I pretended I was. I had a stroke. Yes, you needn't jump, you over there. Thought I didn't know, I suppose. Pish! Of course I knew. It wasn't a bad one, Judy, but I knew it meant no London for me for weeks, perhaps months. So I made up my mind I was going to have you or Eric. You, preferably. Something Claire said made me think you might welcome a change just now, so I made Miss McPherson wire. And now you know."

"You are even nicer than I thought you were," laughed Judy. "And what about Madame Claire? Does she know too, that you're not—seriously ill?"

He moved his head slightly.

"She knows." He smiled, and Judy noticed how his smile lightened his face with its rather tragic lines and hollows. "She said nothing but sudden death or an earthquake would get you away from your family. But I've been pretty bad. Even Miss McPherson admits that. Very bad. And," he said, glowering into the corner where Miss McPherson sat, "I may be worse."

"Well, you won't be while Miss Pendleton's here," said she, "so I'll just be taking a little air. With your permission."

"Bless you, run along! Poor child, she's hardly left me for a minute."

As Miss McPherson went out, he watched her upright little figure affectionately, from under his strikingly white eyebrows.

"A plucky little soul," he said, "and she has borne with me wonderfully. Now, Judy, tell me about your trip. Tell me about Claire, everything you can think of, and about Noel and Eric. Good Lord, how good this is!"

Judy sat and talked till the sky turned from blue to deep orange, and the sun, long after it had dropped behind the sea, sent beams like yellow fingers raying up into the clear color its own going had made; till the lovely Esterel Mountains had grown warmly, richly purple—a purple that seemed mixed with gold dust, and the palms, untamed things that they are, made wild and ragged silhouettes against the sunset.

At half-past four a waiter brought in tea, and Miss McPherson, with color in her cheeks, came in to officiate. Judy had talked herself out for the present, so left the conversation to the other two, who sparred in what appeared to be their customary way. She watched the sky deepen to the larkspur blue of night, and saw the lights come pricking out in the harbor, and heard the yacht bells and far-off voices, and knew that she was very content.

As for Stephen, he took her hand for an instant as she was about to go to her room to rest before dressing for dinner, and said:

"Bless you, Judy! I haven't been as happy as this for over twenty years!"

* * * * * *

"Could anything be lovelier?" thought Judy as she stood at her window the next morning. The wailing pipe of some street peddler had waked her earlier—a weird, Oriental sound, pleasant to open one's eyes to. She looked out over crooked red roofs and beyond them to gray-green hills, while below, to her left, the white yachts rode in the harbor—the calm blue surface of which was unmoved by a single ripple—beside less aristocratic but more picturesque craft with pointed, dark red sails.

The waiter had brought her her breakfast in bed, but she had carried it to a table by the window, and was having it there. A few moments later the postman walked in—the casual way people walked in and out of her room she thought novel and charming—and handed her a letter from Madame Claire, which was dated the same day she left London.

"Dearest Judy," wrote Madame Claire,

"This is just to reassure you, and explain a little. Stephen isn't dangerously ill, thank Heaven! I expect you've discovered that by now. But he had a slight stroke, and was lonely and bored, poor old dear, and as I couldn't go to him, he wanted you. I've been trying to persuade

Millie for some time to let you go away somewhere, but she wouldn't hear of it. Your health was quite satisfactory, etc., etc. So I saw my chance and took it. I know Stephen will take a new lease of life with you there. Have the very happiest time possible, and don't worry about anything. I will be thinking of you in the sun. I imagine almost that I can feel the warmth of it myself; but perhaps it's only my hot water bottle. I am writing this in bed, my rheumatism being still a little troublesome. However, I am reading some delightful books.

"Best love, dear Judy, from

"CLAIRE."

That wonderful old woman! Judy knew that she, from her two rooms at the Kensington Park Hotel, had more influence on her life than any one else in it. More even than Noel.

Stephen was getting better slowly and with patient determination, but although she could see an improvement in him from day to day, it was not until the fifth day of her stay that he was considered well enough to go out in a bath-chair—a vehicle he despised. His detestation of it was somewhat mitigated by the fact that Judy was walking beside it, and he was persuaded, before they had been out very long, to admit that he was enjoying it. They went past the Casino as far as the harbor, which seemed to Judy more Italian than French, and they walked under the weird maze made by the tortured gray branches of the plane trees, that reminded her of something in Dante's Inferno; then to the market place where she bought persimmons bursting with overripeness, and ate them then and there, ruining her handkerchief. Stephen bought flowers, and chatted in his excellent French with the brown-faced peasant women who sold them. They walked along the front again as far as La Reserve, where he promised to take her for lobsters as soon as he was well enough. Handsome cars flashed past them and Judy had just said, "I didn't know the Rolls-Royce was a hibernating bird," when a particularly fine one went slowly by. She saw a man's face looking back at them through the little window at the rear, and in another second the car stopped and began backing.

"Who's that?" asked Stephen gruffly. He disliked bothering with people he knew only slightly, and it annoyed him to have people continually asking him how he was.

A man got out of the car and walked toward them—a strange figure in the sunlight. He gave the impression of heaviness and at the same time of agility. His movements were quick and forceful. He wore a shapeless black overcoat—a hideous enough garment at any time—but there, in the gold light of the southern sun, it seemed to cast a Philistine gloom all about it. He would have passed unnoticed in Wall Street or the City, but on the Riviera in his bowler hat and his dark clothes, Judy thought he insulted the day.

He went straight to Stephen, and the moment he spoke, Judy knew he was an American.

"May I recall myself to your memory, sir?" he inquired, aware that he was not immediately recognized. "I am Whitman Colebridge, whom you last knew out in the Argentine."

"Whitman Colebridge! Of course, of course!" exclaimed Stephen with some geniality. "Well, well! That's more years ago than I like to remember."

"It's a good spell," agreed the other. "But I never forget a face or a name, once I've known them both pretty well. I'm glad of an opportunity of renewing our acquaintance. You were very good to the young man I was then, sir."

"Was I? Was I indeed? That seems to have slipped my memory. But I am delighted to hear it. Judy, my dear, allow me to introduce quite an old friend, Mr. Whitman Colebridge, of . . . of . . . wait!" He held up a thin hand, smiling. "Of Cincinnati."

"Now that's pretty smart of you, sir, to remember that," exclaimed the younger man, who had shaken hands strongly with Judy.

"I don't know why it is," Stephen remarked to Judy, "but in America it's always 'Mr. Jones of St. Louis,' or 'Mr. Smith of Council Bluffs,' or Mr. Robinson of Denver.' One learns to associate the name with the place."

"Which shows," suggested Judy, "that a love of titles still lingers in the Republican breast."

"That's so, I expect," smiled Mr. Colebridge, in whose eyes Judy, it seemed, had immediately found favor. "But what about this old-fashioned vehicle of yours? This doesn't signify that you're an invalid, I trust?"

"I've been a miserable, good-for-nothing old man for some time," Stephen answered, "with most of Job's ailments, but without his virtues. Now, however, since Miss Pendleton of London has come to lighten my darkness, I mean to get well. Yes, distinctly I mean to get well."

"That's fine!" approved Mr. Colebridge. "This one-man Victoria that you've got here doesn't look good to me. I haven't forgotten our trip over the Andes together, sir."

"Ah!" agreed Stephen, nodding. "That was a trip! Pleasant to look back upon."

"Never mind," said Judy, "we'll take a trip over the Esterel Mountains in a day or two. Mr. de Lisle hasn't been out of Cannes since he first came here," she told Mr. Colebridge, "but we're planning some trips for next week."

"You have your own automobile here?" inquired Mr. Colebridge.

"No, no," Stephen said. "We mean to hire one."

"But why do that, sir? Here is mine"—he waved his hand toward his property—"at your disposal. The chauffeur is a native of these parts, and I needn't brag about the machine because you are well acquainted with its virtues. So why not make use of it, with or without its owner?"

"Oh, that's very kind," said Stephen, "but really . . . no, no, we couldn't think of it. I don't see why you should burden yourself with an irascible invalid. Do you, Judy?"

"Perhaps Mr. Colebridge will take us out some day, and see how he likes us," said Judy, who wasn't at all sure that she liked Mr. Colebridge.

"But we certainly couldn't commandeer your car, as you so kindly suggest."

"I'm here alone," said Mr. Colebridge, "the machine holds seven, and I don't talk French. So you'd be doing me a real kindness. I'm staying at the Hotel Beaulieu. May I ask where you——?"

"We're stopping at the Riviera," Stephen told him. "Come and see us."

"I shall avail myself of your kind invitation. I presume you play, Miss Pendleton?"

"Play? Oh, the Casino? I haven't been yet, but I mean to go, when Mr. de Lisle is better. I've never gambled and I'm longing to."

"I go there every night," said the heavy one. "I flatter myself I know the game, sir. When I'm ahead I quit. And I generally quit ahead." He clapped his hand to his pocket, and then felt inside his coat. Judy expected bank notes to appear, but instead he produced a gold cigar case.

"Will you smoke, sir? I reckon these are superior to what you can obtain hereabouts."

The old man waved them away.

"If they were made on Olympus for Jove himself, I couldn't smoke one," he said.

"Too bad!" commiserated the other, taking one himself. "You used to be fond of a good cigar in the old days, sir."

"Fond!" exclaimed Stephen. "Do you call that fond! I'd sell my immortal soul for one now, if it weren't for my doctor."

"Well," said Mr. Colebridge, turning to Judy, "I mustn't detain you. It's been a real pleasure to meet you, Miss Pendleton, and to see you again, sir. Suppose I come around Monday, and take you both to Grasse? That's just a pleasant, easy little run. Say about two-thirty. I hope you will do me the honor, Miss Pendleton."

There seemed no reason to refuse.

"If Mr. de Lisle's well enough—and I feel sure he will be," she said, shaking Mr. Colebridge's proffered hand. "It's very kind of you."

"On Monday, then. I shall look forward to that with real pleasure."

They watched him, his long black cigar in his mouth, get into his beautiful car again and go smoothly off.

"Well, well!" said Stephen. "That's an odd thing! I haven't thought of that fellow for over ten years."

"Tell me about him. What is he? One of the 'Captains of Industry'?"

"Something of that sort, I expect. We met in the Argentine."

"Don't tell me he was there on a holiday! That man never took a holiday in his life. Did you ever see such clothes? He looked as though he was on his way to a directors' meeting."

"He was just a younger edition in those days of what he is now. He told me, I remember, that he was the forerunner of 'big business.' Connected with some great exporting house, I think. Details have left my mind. But he impressed me. Kind, full of bluff, pushing, selfish, likable. No real humor. Oh, he can see a joke, but that doesn't always mean humor. No philosophy of life—yet. No sense of *values*. Values, yes! It's an interesting type. Egotistic. But powerful. I knew he'd get on. We had some long talks, I remember. He liked me for some reason. I was able to do him a good turn, I think, but I forget what it was."

"His æsthetic or beauty-loving side is utterly undeveloped," laughed Judy. "Hence those clothes. He's rather terrible in a way, and yet I dare say I might like him if I knew him better."

"You might," mused Stephen, "you might."

CHAPTER XIX

"Dearest Claire," wrote Judy.

"Every moment that I spend here in this lovely place, I say to myself, 'You have Claire to thank for this.' I know now how cleverly you managed it all. A hint here, a word there. And I know that you never intended to let Eric come, even if he could have arranged it. That was merely to satisfy the family. Oh, I know your little ways!

"As for your old Stephen, I adore him. And he's really making a wonderful recovery. I'll bring him back to you, Claire. My one object in life now is to help to bring you and him together again.

"I wonder if you've seen Major Crosby again? I do hope you have, for I feel you'd be so good for him, and it's absurd for him to be so out of touch with things. I know you like him and I'm very glad, for I like him, and I know Noel does too. I don't suppose for a moment that he'll ever be anything but poor. Even if his book should prove to be a classic, it would never bring

him in much money. All the same I feel sure that it's a remarkable book.

"There is a man here who is the very opposite of Major Crosby. I feel they can hardly be made of the same stuff. This man is an American whom Stephen knew years ago in the Argentine. He's very rich, and not afflicted with modesty. He has no moods, no reserves, and no curiosity. I never realized before what an agreeable quality curiosity was until I met him. Europe is a playground for him. Not that he knows how to play—he doesn't. He merely does what other people do, and spends prodigious sums of money, and when he tries to be gay or facetious it's like watching a steam engine playing with its tail. We spar a good deal, but he seems to like it. He makes me ponderous compliments—oh, so ponderous! I tell him I'm not used to compliments, and that in England the more we approve of people the less we trouble to let them know it, and that the only person who sometimes tells me I'm rather nice is my brother Noel.

" 'Say,' remarks Mr. Colebridge, 'that brother of yours must be kinder human!'

"Mr. and Mrs. Assheton are here and they chaperon me at the Casino evenings after Stephen

has gone to bed. We usually make a foursome, for Mr. Colebridge nearly always joins us."

"You don't know how much I'm enjoying it all, Claire. I think I must have died and gone to Heaven. Certainly the Channel wasn't unlike the Styx. I feel all the time though that it's you who ought to be here with Stephen instead of me. But he's going to get well, and you're going to see him again. Miss McPherson is a dear. I gathered that she was from Stephen's letters.

"How are Eric and Louise getting on? But I expect Noel will tell me all the news. You have all you can do to keep Stephen supplied with letters.

"Good-by, Madame Claire. Remember me to your daughter Millie when you see her. Really, mother took my coming here as a personal affront. She thinks that no one but Gordon should have any advantages. Aren't some parents odd, sometimes?

"Your very loving,
"JUDY."

Very satisfactory, thought Madame Claire, as she finished reading the letter. All sorts of ends were furthered by this visit. Stephen would take a new lease on life with Judy there. It was just the tonic that he needed. He would be certain to want to settle something on her. If he had wished to before he knew her, how much more would he now! She would, more or less unconsciously, present her own image to him, as she was to-day. Heaven alone knew how he had been picturing her all these years! And, too, Judy would meet—was meeting—new people. She already had an admirer. Madame Claire was no matchmaker; she abhorred matchmaking; but she knew that Judy was interested in Major Crosby and it would help her to know how deeply she was interested if she could compare him with other men. This Mr. Colebridge—he wasn't at all Judy's sort, perhaps—and yet he might attract her by his very differences. Or, if he failed to attract her, he might help her to define her feelings for the other more clearly.

Madame Claire was no advocate of marriage as the only career for women, but Judy's gifts seemed all to be in that direction. She had charm, tact, good sense. Her other qualities would emerge once she was away from the suffocating atmosphere of Eaton Square and Millie. She had never had a chance. Not that marriage with Major Crosby, for instance, would offer much scope for her talents . . . and yet, on the other hand, it might . . . it might. Well, well, Madame Claire told herself, she wouldn't raise a finger to bring it about. But she meant the girl to have a breathing space . . . time to think, and a new environment to think in. If she herself had had that at a certain period of her own life. . . .

She was expecting Eric this afternoon between five and six. Eric and Louise . . . there was a problem for her untangling! Two charming people—for Louise could be charming—who were at heart fond of each other, and yet were utterly at cross purposes. Madame Claire held the remarkable belief that no problem existed without its solution—however difficult that solution might be to come by—just as she believed that every poison had its antidote, and every evil its complementary good. Why, then, couldn't she think of a way to bring those two together? Louise's mind wanted prying open. It had closed on its jealousies as a pitcher plant closes on its food. Nothing that was in could get out, and nothing that was out could get in. An unfortunate state of affairs!

Eric came in bringing with him something fresh and vital that always seemed to accompany him. Judy called it his aura. He was quick in all his movements—the sort of man who gets through a great deal in a day and without fuss or bustle.

He advanced on Madame Claire and kissed her.

"You look wonderful! I've half an hour to spend with you to-day."

He drew up a chair beside hers.

"Don't you get very tired of being always busy?" she asked him, smiling.

"Yes. I do. But I must either be in the thick of things or out of them altogether. And just now things are very thick indeed, and getting thicker."

"I really enjoy being outside," she said. "One sees so much better."

"But are you outside?" He looked narrowly at her with humorous, quizzical eyes. "Are you? I never knew you to be, puller of many threads!"

She laughed.

"Oh, I give a feeble jerk now and then. It's all I can do. Tell me about Louise. I haven't seen her for a week or more."

"About Louise? But, my dear mother, if I once start talking about Louise . . ."

"Yes? Well, why not? What am I here for? Is there any . . . improvement, do you think?"

"Improvement? Let me tell you, then. You've brought it on yourself. I warned you." He laughed. "I'll tell you about last night. Last night we had Sir Henry Boyle-Stevens to dinner, and Mr. Stedman. About halfway through dinner Sir Henry said to Louise, but looking at me and smiling, 'It's a great comfort to me to be working with your husband. He is untiring and dependable.' Old Sir Henry does like me, and we've always got on together like anything. Would you like to hear what Louise said in reply? Would you? Very well. She said—I will give you her exact words and their emphasis—'I suppose Eric *is* dependable, *politically*.' 'I suppose,' you observe, and then the accent on 'politically.' Sir Henry looked quickly at her, and then at me, and changed the subject. She meant me to hear. Then the next thing. After dinner the Lewis Pringles came in. We were still in the dining room—the men, I mean—and when we joined the rest in the drawing-room Louise greeted me with these words—for my ears alone—'You needn't have hurried, Eric. I was just enjoying hearing my own voice for a change.' You ask me if there's any improvement! What am I to do? We can't go on like this much longer."

"No. And I don't think you ought to."

He flung himself back into his chair.

"Why does she live in my house if she dislikes me as much as that?"

"She doesn't dislike you, my dear. It's an extraordinary nature. Do you remember the unfortunate girl in the fairy tale? Every time she opened her mouth toads and snails and other horrid things came out of it. Well, that's Louise. That old hag jealousy has bewitched her. She's not happy, poor thing."

"I don't suppose she is happy. I don't see how she can be. But I can't make her happy, and she can't help making me miserable. I can't even ignore her."

"Try living apart for six months."

"She suggested that herself. Of course she expects me to go down on my knees and beg her to stay."

"Don't you do it! Let her go. Make her go. Give it out to your friends that the doctor says she must live in the country for a while. Insist on her going."

"And who would look after the house? I could shut it up I suppose and go to a hotel."

"No, no. Don't do that. I'll find some one," said Madame Claire. "You leave that to me."

"You mean a housekeeper?"

"I don't know, at the moment. I'll think of somebody."

"Louise may not come back," he said.

"Of course she'll come back. She has no intention of letting any other woman have you. You'll see . . . only you must see that she stays away six months this time. That last visit to Mistley wasn't long enough."

"I think you understand her better than I do."

"Oh, I do understand her. That's the curious thing about it. But it always seems to me that odd people are much easier to understand than simple people. Once you give people credit for being odd, nothing that they do surprises you. What's so difficult is to give people credit for being simple. Now if Louise would only understand that you are very simple——"

"Am I?"

"Very. You're one of the least complex people I've ever known. None of my children are complex. Not even Connie, who thinks she is. By the way, have you seen her lately?"

"Not for several days. I called at her hotel just before coming here, but she was out."

"Yes, didn't you know? This is the afternoon of Petrovitch's concert. She's there, with Noel."

"Ah! Feasting her eyes and ears."

"You'd better stay and hear Noel's account of it." She looked at her watch. "He promised he'd come in afterwards. I'm glad he took her. It will be an outlet for her emotions. The papers just hint that Petrovitch is on the downward grade, Eric. Not the master that he was. He's not very young, you know."

"I suppose not. He wasn't a young man when she first knew him. But if the world were to reject and despise him, Connie would cling to him all the more. So there's no hope in that direction."

"Oh, yes," agreed Madame Claire. "She'd pride herself on it."

They talked for nearly half an hour, and Eric was about to go when Dawson opened the door to announce "Master Noel."

"Hello!" exclaimed Noel. "Two birds with one stone. That's splendid. Greetings, Claire. I'm bursting with talk. How are you, Eric?"

"We're bursting to hear you talk," Madame Claire told him. "Sit down and tell us all about it."

"Whew!" Noel stretched himself out in a chair and ran his fingers through his hair. "I feel a bit of a rag. Concerts always make me feel like that, but this one was rather more exhausting than usual."

"Was it a good concert?"

"Well, of course I'm no musician, but it seemed all right to me. Several thousand people had come to hear the lion roar, and they all seemed pleased with his roaring. But first of all, I wish you could have seen Connie, complete with dark shadows under her eyes, large black hat and a bunch of gardenias. Petrovitch saw her at once—we had seats almost under the piano—and they exchanged soul to soul looks. And then he sat down to play. Gosh, the fellow can play! He even had me spellbound. As for Connie—but I leave that to your imagination. I'll bet Petrovitch played as never before. Sees nephew sitting beside beautiful aunt. Tries to charm aunt away from nephew. Does so—or jolly near it. Connie sat there with her soul in her eyes. I'm sorry to have to mention souls so often, but the narrative seems to require it. Well, I wish you could have heard the applause. People stood up and clapped and clapped and clapped. The gallery yelled and shouted. Illiodor—that's his un-Christian name—tore off two or three encores and bowed and bowed, and then gazed at Connie and bowed some more, and then finally came back and played something very tender—you know the sort of thing—a fragment, a thought, a tear—and then gazed some more at Connie and that was the end of it. I sat there feeling proud all the time. Proprietary, I suppose you'd call it. Something like this: 'You like it? Good. Oh, yes, in a way he's one of the family. Fellow my aunt ran off with. Quite one of the family.' "

"How absurd you are, Noel!" laughed Madame Claire.

"And then what happened?" asked Eric.

"Well, we got out finally and headed for home. Connie hung on my arm like a wilted flower, and I can tell you, she's no light weight. I couldn't possibly put her in a 'bus in the state she was in—I have some sense of the fitness of things—so we took a taxi and she sat in it with her hands clasped and her eyes fixed before her, murmuring, 'Wasn't he divine, divine!' I felt that the situation was becoming a bit too tense, so I said, 'Yes, he's all right, but I think Grock's more amusing.' But it didn't annoy her a bit. She just kept on rocking herself and murmuring, 'Divine, divine!' "

"Did you leave her in that state?" Eric inquired.

"Oh, she won't recover for several days. When we got back to the hotel she thanked me as if I'd saved her from drowning—I didn't tell her it was all your idea, Claire—and said she'd carry the memory of that afternoon in her heart forever. I wonder? I'm pretty sure she will see him, or write to him. But there's one thing about Connie—she's honest. She won't see him and not tell me. I can trust her for that."

Later on the conversation turned on Major Crosby. Madame Claire asked Noel if he had seen him.

"Oh, about that," said Noel. "I went to see his doctor . . . the nice old fellow who came in that night; and I asked him to please send the bill to me. 'Bill?' he said. 'What bill?' When I said 'Major Crosby's,' he clapped me on the back and said, 'I don't send bills to the man who risked his life to get my son out of a shell-hole, under fire.' So now we know. He seems to think the world of Chip."

"Ah," said Madame Claire. "Yes, gallant. . . . I knew that. I hope he comes to see me."

"He said he meant to when I saw him last."

"I seem to be the only one of the family who hasn't met him," said Eric. "What do the others think of him?"

"Well," Noel told him, "Gordon didn't think anything—or anyhow, didn't say. Helen liked him—she's a good sort when she wants to be, and talks about having him meet influential people—publishers, I suppose she means. Mother said he wasn't connected with any Crosbys she ever heard of, and dad looked him up in *Who's Who?* and not finding him asked me how long I'd known him and what clubs he belonged to. Connie thinks he's quite charming, but doesn't understand women! Yes, I thought you'd smile. But what I want to know is, what does Judy think of him?"

"She's rather interested," said Madame Claire. "What do you think of him yourself, Noel?"

"One of the decentest fellows I ever knew."

"But hasn't a bob, I understand," remarked Eric. "Judy's a brave girl if she doesn't funk it. If only she had something of her own. . . ."

Madame Claire nodded.

"Yes, that would make all the difference. However, I'm certain nothing's been said, and I rather think nothing will be said, unless . . ." But she changed her mind about finishing her sentence.

"And what's your own news, Noel?" asked Eric. "Have you settled everything with Teal, about going to Germany?"

"Yes, thanks to you. Reparations Committee. And I haven't spoken a word of German, except to Hun prisoners during the war, since I was at school. I don't think it's my line, but the screw's fair, and it ought to be interesting, and besides, there aren't too many things going for a pore cripple. I like Cecil Teal, in spite of his name."

"When do you go?" Madame Claire asked.

"In three weeks. Do you think Judy'll be back?"

"I'm certain she'll come back."

"That's all right, then. Well, I must be off. Coming my way, Eric? I'm going to the club."

As they were leaving, Madame Claire called Noel back.

"Noel, tell Connie that I want to see her to-morrow or the next day. As soon as she's recovered. And, Eric, you'll let me know about Louise, won't you? She's not to go without saying good-by to me . . . if she does go."

"Oh, she's going," he said. "My wife," he explained, turning to Noel, "finds life with me intolerable."

"Well, there's divorce, thank Heaven!" Noel said. "I always feel about marriage and divorce the way I feel about those illuminated signs in theaters—the exits, you know, in case of fire. One simply wouldn't go into a theater unless they were there."

"In this case, however," said Madame Claire, "there isn't going to be a fire, and Eric's only seen the first act of the play. Good night, my dears."

CHAPTER XX

JUDY'S letter was followed by one from Stephen. Madame Claire felt that it was from some one very close at hand. He seemed to be coming nearer to her daily, and she no longer visualized him as separated from her by so many miles of land and water. He was accessible now. They were more readily accessible to each other by thoughts. She felt more confidence in his health, too, and in his determination to come to England again. She had been wise in sending Judy to him!

"*It's amazing,*" Stephen wrote, "*how much there is of you in Judy. She has your way of understanding what one wants to say almost before one has said it. She doesn't make me feel an old man. We talk as equals. She is very human and is gifted with real humor, which means that she enjoys the humorous side of mankind. I think that her not very happy youth—for it's obvious that she has been far from happy at home—has given her a certain depth and insight.*

"*She is much amused by an old friend of mine,* *an American named Colebridge. We met years ago in the Argentine, and he considers that he has reason to be grateful for something in the past. Together, the two are a source of great entertainment to me. Judy becomes every moment more British, and he—well, he couldn't become more American. He admires Judy enormously, and I think he is ready to lay a not inconsiderable fortune at her feet. I wish I could remember their talk. Yesterday we motored to Grasse, and coming home we passed peasants returning from their work in the fields. Simple, contented people, with clothes colored like the earth.*

" 'In America,' says Mr. Colebridge, 'all these folks would own Fords.'

" 'Then thank God for Europe!' says Judy; and so they go on, until at last Mr. Colebridge turns to me and says, 'Say, I guess I'm ready to agree to anything Miss Pendleton says. She's got more sense than any woman I ever met.' Which takes the wind out of Judy's sails. They make me feel years younger. Colebridge wears the most Philistine clothes, and never looks at the scenery. He sees nothing.

"Judy often goes to the Casino, and she tells me she saw Chiozzi there last night. He was with Mlle. Pauline, whom Judy describes as a

most exquisite creature. She was struck with the contrast between them—Chiozzi so dark and hideous, and the woman so fair and pretty—and she asked some one who they were. She says Chiozzi is extremely jealous and was constantly watching his companion. She also says that he was losing a great deal of money—Connie's money, perhaps?—at the tables. He has left this hotel, so I never see him now.

"Miss McPherson seems to think I will be able to travel in less than a month. A month, Claire! Only thirty days. It's nothing. And yet, it's an eternity. I might have another stroke—no, no! I feel sure I won't. Not with Judy here. I think it was sheer boredom that brought it on before. That, and a hopeless feeling that I should never quite reach you. Now I seem to have accomplished half the journey.

"I have said nothing to Judy as yet about a settlement. It is a difficult subject, and I feel I must tread lightly. All the same, I mean to have my way. If the young deny us these pleasures, what is left for us? Of course, if she were to marry Colebridge she wouldn't want it, but that I feel almost certain she will not do. They are poles apart. It's not because of their nationality. It's because of their outlook on life. It wouldn't

do. If Judy were less sensitive, less feeling, less intelligent, it might.

"Well, I am aweary of this eternal sunshine. And when the sun does not shine, it all seems very drab. One is constantly reminded here of too much that is rich—and gross. And yet it is lovely, I suppose, very lovely.

"It's you I want, Claire, and London. For the first time in my life I'm unspeakably, unutterably homesick. I long to see the rain on London streets, the lamps' yellow eyes through the deep blue haze and smoke. I want crocuses and primroses instead of mimosa. I want little, homely, decorous shops, and people who put on their clothes merely to cover them and to keep warm. I want your fireside and you and Dawson, and crumpets for tea. What an old fool I am! I would like to hear the old talk of the London that I knew; these memoirs, that play, such and such a speech; what So and So said to Blank when he met him in the lobby of the House; who is talked of as the next Speaker. I hardly dare look at the papers, Claire, for then I know how many years there are between the old talk and the talk of to-day. The jingle of hansom bells seem to run through it all, and faint, forgotten old tunes.

"But it will all be preserved, summed up, epitomized in you. I will find it all again in you.

"It is Judy who has brought back this love of London. It is she who has made it fresh again.

"She says your hair is perfectly white. How pretty it must be!

"Good-by! I grow verbose, lachrymose, and comatose.

"STEPHEN."

Well, he would find London changed, though it had changed less than most Western cities. But he would find that it had retained its old character even though it had assumed new manners. And after all, why pretend that it had not improved? It had improved. It was easier to get about now than it had been in Stephen's day. There was more to do. There was less misery among the poor. One needn't feel so suicidal on Sundays. There were better shops, better libraries, and—yes—more and better books. Better preachers in the pulpits, too, better food, better music, better teachers in the schools. And if one regretted the hansom bells and the old tunes, that was because one regretted one's youth, and the friends of one's youth. But the present couldn't be blamed for that. The present was full of promise, let the old fogies say what they pleased. The sea was rougher, perhaps, but the port was nearer . . . and after all, seasickness wasn't often fatal, and was very often beneficial. Not that there weren't alarming symptoms—there were. . . .

Stephen and she could still go to the Temple and see the old, unchanged gray stones, and the vivid grass making a carpet for the delicate feet of spring when she visited London; and she loved to visit London, that beloved guest, as though she delighted in contrasting her fleeting and perennial loveliness with what was gray and immutable. The old, slow river, too, and the towers of Westminster—they could look at them and see little change there.

And after all, they hadn't stood still themselves. They had gone on. If they hadn't, she wouldn't have fitted into the picture to-day, as she knew she did, nor would Stephen have found so much in common with Judy. No, she had long ago said good-by to the hansom bells and the bustles and the bad doctors and the inferior plumbing—let's be honest—and the extremely uncomfortable traveling, and she had said good-by without regret.

She was writing to him the following afternoon, putting these thoughts on paper while they were still fresh in her mind, when Major Crosby called. She had hoped he would come. Certainly he wouldn't go to Eaton Square for news of Judy. He would come to her. She wondered how far he would commit himself. Here was another simple man, but simple in a different way from Eric's way. Major Crosby's was the simplicity of the hermit, Eric's of the clear thinking man of action who had no use for subtleties. She hoped he would feel that he could unburden himself to a woman of her age.

That, evidently, was one of the things he had come for. Madame Claire wanted to be able to make up her mind about him to-day. She had liked him before, but to-day she hoped to be able to say, "Yes, that's the man for Judy."

He very soon asked for news of her.

"She's being extraordinarily good for my old friend Stephen de Lisle," she told him. "It's well, Major Crosby, to keep one's hold on the present generation. Mr. de Lisle had almost lost his, and he was slipping back. That's why I sent Judy to him."

"Will she be back in time to see her brother before he goes?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure of it. She'll be very lonely without Noel."

What nice eyes the man had! Blue-gray eyes, rather misty, like the eyes of a kitten or a baby. The face was serious—a little too serious, she thought. She liked it though. It was a good face. She liked the thin, rather aquiline nose, the close-cut, brown mustache, the mouth with its expression of peculiar sweetness. She could picture him performing acts of curious bravery, unconscious of any heroism. A man who could study Druidism in the trenches! . . . But life was passing him by, as it would pass Judy by, unless she made up her mind to grasp it.

"Tell me," she said, "how nearly finished is that prodigious book of yours?"

"It's practically done. I'm still polishing it up though. It won't be a popular book, Lady Gregory. In fact I think it will be very unpopular."

"With whom will it be unpopular?"

"Oh, with people who lay much stress upon ritual and creed. I think they will dislike knowing how much of the pagan ritual has come down to us, and how closely our own beliefs are bound up with those of savage peoples. And there are others who don't like hearing that Christianity is, comparatively speaking, modern, and that there are other vastly more ancient revelations. And there are people who won't like what I've said about the belief in reincarnation, nor be willing to accede an important place to the so-called modern religions, such as Christian Science, New Thought, and Spiritualism. The book will be banned, undoubtedly, by one great church, and public libraries will think twice before circulating it. And yet I had to write it, and I'm glad I've written it. I only wish it were fuller and more convincing. It lacks what print must always lack—the power to persuade."

"And you wish to persuade us . . . of what?"

"The need for tolerance."

"You think we are still intolerant? And yet there are plenty of people who say we have grown too tolerant."

He shook his head.

"There is only one tolerance that I deplore."

"And that is?"

"Tolerance toward the man who believes in nothing at all."

"Why have you singled out that unfortunate?"

"Because we have much to fear from him." He got up and stood with his back to the fire. "When men believe in nothing, they rot. If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that. The world has had its greatest moments at the times of its greatest faith. Then when belief goes, the decline begins. But first these people who believe in nothing set up idols of their own making. They call them by fine names—liberty, perhaps, or communism, or the freedom of the proletariat, or the gospel of anarchy, or mob rule. But they very soon tire of worshiping even them. Then fear enters their hearts. They believe in no hereafter and no god. They see that life here is short and uncertain. They see that there are good things in the world—fine food, fine clothes, money, power. They want the cash. The credit can go. The people who lay up treasures in heaven are fools. Well then, let them lay up their treasures in heaven—and let them go after them. They themselves mean to have what they can see, feel, touch, smell. They begin trampling, stampeding, cursing. Get, get, get, they cry. What do they attack first? The churches. Away with restraint, away with rules, away with sickly faith. They want more concrete things and they mean to get them. Then blood incites them further. They kill and kill and kill. Killing and grabbing—they are occupied with nothing else. Some for the sake of appearances or because they like the sound of words go about shouting their phrases. But sooner or later they turn on each other; or their followers, sick of blood, turn upon them. And then, when there is a little peace, faith creeps back into people's hearts again, and a belief in God. And they wonder how the madness came, and they try to wipe out the blood stains and live sanely again. And they go back to work in the fields and stop hating each other. Perhaps they have learned something. Not always. But they have got tolerance again, and a belief. And with those two things they can begin once more. To believe in something beyond this world, to have faith in the destiny of the soul . . . that's everything."

He looked at her, suddenly abashed.

"I've been talking to you," he said, "as if I were addressing a meeting. I'm so sorry."

"I've liked it. Go on. So your book shows——"

"Shows that any faith is good. Shows that all beliefs are so intermingled that they are almost inextricable. It shows that what matters is their common foundation—the belief in a Divine Creator. Without these various revelations that are the foundations of religion, the world would have been chaos. Destroy them, and the world will be chaos. Christianity is the light on the path of the Western world. Other worlds, other lights. But to say that we can walk without light, or to shut our eyes and say there is no light—that is the great insanity, the great evil."

"Yes, I think that's true," she agreed.

"I'm not a religious fellow, in the ordinary sense of the word," he explained, "and yet I'm more interested in religion than in any other subject. I do go to church, but more as a student than a worshiper. I like to think about the psychology of a congregation, and the possible—the probable benefits of worshiping all together in a building with four walls and a roof."

It wasn't so difficult, after all, to draw him out. She liked making him talk. And when she thought she had drawn him out enough she rang for tea.

"Of course this work of yours is tremendously interesting, but at the same time I feel more than ever that you need diversions. The dancing wasn't altogether a success, I gathered."

"No," he agreed, smiling, "I'm afraid it wasn't. But when we were discussing hobbies the other day, I forgot to tell you that I had another, besides religions. And that's the stage."

Madame Claire laughed.

"You extraordinary man! What aspect of the stage?"

"I like writing plays. I've written several, but I don't think they're any good and I've never tried to do anything with them. I don't think my people would be real—especially the women. I wonder—I'd like—would you read them some time? You're critical, but you're very kind, too."

"I long to read them! Bring them. The sooner the better. I love plays and I love the theater, and though my criticisms may not be valuable, you shall have them. I often wish Judy had gone on the stage. She has the looks and she has talent, too. But of course it would have killed her parents."

It was then that he took the plunge. She had felt for some time that he was preparing to take it.

"Miss Pendleton," he said, "is the only woman I have ever met who has made me wish I were a rich man—or a successful man. Not that she would consider me if I were."

"I'm beginning to think you're human!" cried Madame Claire. "The stage; and now you're in love with Judy. I'm delighted, Major Crosby! Delighted. Now we have two excellent diversions for you. Plays, and love."

Her old eyes twinkled.

"But I've no talent for either."

"Oh, let some one else judge of that! Let Judy judge."

He looked somewhat confused.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said what I did."

"Why not? I sha'n't give you away."

"If I had any prospects at all . . ."

"It's amazing," she interrupted, "how strong and how weak men can be! There's my son Eric, for instance. A born fighter. In war, in politics, no compromise. But in love—in love he has the courage of a . . . of a schoolgirl. If he had only *managed* his wife! What he needs is a course in nettle-grasping. And so do you, Major Crosby."

"But I don't think for a minute that Miss Pendleton——"

He paused, hoping, she saw, that she would help him out.

"That Miss Pendleton is interested?"

"Oh, interested . . . she might be, just a little, out of the kindness of her heart."

"Major Crosby, let me tell you that women are only kind when it gives them pleasure to be kind. A woman will rarely put herself out, I'm afraid, for a man who bores her."

"But even if she were—interested—even if she did think twice about me, which I find it very difficult to believe, I've nothing whatever to offer her."

"You mean you can't offer her money."

"That's only one of the things I haven't got."

He stood in front of the fire again, as if to give himself the advantage of higher ground. He wanted to be convincing even while he hoped to be convinced.

"All I ask you to do," said Madame Claire, "is, for your own sake, to give yourself a chance. There are obstacles, admittedly, but don't begin by throwing up earthworks as well. Don't *make* obstacles. Mind you, I'm not encouraging you. I only know that Judy likes you more than she likes most people. Beyond that I'm completely in the dark. Yes, Dawson?"

"Please, m'lady," said Dawson from the doorway, "can you see Miss Connie?"

"Yes. Ask her to come in. No, don't go, Major Crosby. You've met my daughter, Countess Chiozzi."

"I must go," he said, holding out his hand. "But I'd like to come again soon, if I may."

"If you don't," she said, smiling up at him, "I shall think I have lectured you too much. And the plays—don't forget them!"

He exchanged a few words with Connie as he passed her in the hall, and she was graciously polite to him. She never forgot for an instant, in the presence of a man, that she was a charming woman. After she had kissed her mother, however, she felt that a remonstrance was justifiable.

"Mother, you're not encouraging that man, I hope?"

"No, Connie, my dear, I assure you I'm not. I think that the difference in our ages is really too great."

"Oh, mother! I meant for Judy, of course."

"Ah! But before I answer that, let me tell you of something Eric and I thought of a few days ago. Something to do with you."

Before Connie had left her, an hour later, she had agreed to give up her rooms at the hotel as soon as Noel went to Germany, and go and keep house for Eric.

She had been wondering how she was going to bear her life after Noel left, she said.

"If Eric really wants me, of course I'll go. I'm not a very good housekeeper, I'm afraid. I'm so out of practice."

"It will be a change for him," Madame Claire told her. "Louise is rather too good. She fusses. And besides, Eric won't be difficult. He has very simple tastes."

"I think," said Connie, "that from what I've heard, I shall be a better hostess than his wife has been."

"I'm convinced of it," answered Madame Claire.

When Connie had gone, she telephoned at once to Eric, to tell him what she had done.

"It's so obviously the best thing all round," he agreed, "that I simply never thought of it. If it suits Connie, it suits me."

"It suits Connie very well. But of course you'll say nothing to Louise. It will be time enough for her to know when she's settled comfortably at Mistley."

CHAPTER XXI

Two weeks later the following letter came from Judy:

"Dearest Claire,

"This is the last letter I'll write to you from here, as I'm coming home so soon now. I wish I could bring Stephen with me, but Miss McPherson says he won't be ready to travel for another week or so, and of course I want to be back in time to spend a few days with Noel before he goes. But Stephen is wonderfully better and quite light-hearted, and, at the prospect of seeing you, light-headed.

"Things have been happening here. Many things.

"In the first place we heard this morning that a Count Somebody—our informant, Mr. Colebridge, couldn't remember the name—had been found murdered on the Upper Corniche Road. He says it was an Italian name, and he is going to find out all he can about it. I'm almost certain it will prove to be Chiozzi. He was so fearfully jealous of that little dancer Mlle. Pauline.

I can quite imagine that he might have tried to kill her and that she might have stabbed him in self-defense. The body, they say—or Mr. Colebridge says—was dropped from a motor. They have a great way of hushing things up here, but we will try to find out all about it. Won't Connie adore being a widow again? Of course you won't say anything to anybody yet, as it would be so awfully disappointing if it should turn out to be some one else. How callous I am! But if you could have seen him——!

"Well, Stephen and I have been seeing life, and rolling about in Mr. Colebridge's car. The man won't take no for an answer when it comes to going out with him. Yesterday we went to the most wonderful little town—Gourdon, its name was—perched on top of a mountain, like an eagle, and looking over the Mediterranean for endless miles. I saw Italy, and I'm not at all sure I didn't see Africa. It was really the place of my dreams; the town fifteenth century, I imagine. I was in heaven there. I ran away from Mr. Colebridge and looked over the edge alone—down into the olive orchards. Not a sound but the cooing of pigeons and the far away tinkle of mule bells. And then Mr. C. came, with his cigar in his mouth and his black coat on, and talked about running a

funicular up the mountain and having a first-class hotel on the top. I couldn't speak. Coming to earth with such a bump as that was too much for me. He mistook my silence for something else, and when I saw him take off his hat and remove his cigar from his mouth, I knew what was coming. I'm afraid I was rather ruthless. If he hadn't called me 'little girl' I might have been kinder. At any rate I fled back to Stephen who couldn't climb the hill leading to the town, and left Mr. Colebridge gazing into space. Probably planning where the funicular should go. No, that's unfair. Anyhow, I left him, and when he joined us he was silent for once. I do like him, but marry him—oh, no, no! He has made me fall in love with all modest, shy men. With all poor, unlucky men. With any one, in fact, who is sensitive and perceptive.

"Success isn't attractive in itself. It has to be offset by other attributes. It can't be good for any one to own as many things as Mr. Colebridge owns. A railroad, endless shares in companies, factories, businesses, even theaters—no, he isn't a Jew. He's terrific. I should be just a thing to hang clothes on. He doesn't know anything about me. I don't believe he knows what color my eyes are.

"He has helped me to make up my mind about Major Crosby, who has written me several charming letters. I've written him very nice ones in return; as nice as I dared to write. And, oh, Claire! What do you think Stephen means to do? He means to settle something on me! I don't know exactly how much. But think of it! So that I can marry a poor man or no one at all, just as I like. I can be independent. I can't believe it yet. I think I shall marry Chip with it, if what he tries not to say in his letters is true.

"Mr. Colebridge is coming to London, about the same time that I am. Business, he says. I only hope he doesn't take the same train. I've been very definite, but his epidermis is thick. He says he is anxious to meet you. One of the nice things about him is that he admires Stephen.

"Good-by, Claire. I will see you soon. Thanks to you and to Stephen, I feel that life is just beginning for me."

"Devotedly,
"JUDY."

Very satisfactory, thought Madame Claire. No one wants gratitude—no one, except, perhaps, a bully—but when one does get it, how it warms the heart!

Callous or not, she couldn't help hoping, like Judy, that the murdered Italian might prove to be Connie's entirely superfluous husband. No other man, she felt, could so thoroughly deserve to die such a death, if half the things Connie had told of him were true. And Connie was not an untruthful woman. He was too evil to live . . . too evil to die, perhaps, but his fate in the next world concerned her less than his activities in this.

Then one more letter from Stephen—the last, he said, from Cannes. "D.V.," murmured Madame Claire as she read the words.

"You don't know what you did for me when you lent me Judy," he wrote. *"She has grown very dear to me, and I have persuaded her, I think, to let me settle something on her. As I pointed out to her, if you had married me, as she often says you ought to have done, she would have been, to all practical purposes, my granddaughter. My wants are simple, and I have only my niece Monica and Miss McPherson to think of, and they are already arranged for. Judy has given me an added interest in life, and as I tell her, I feel I'm buying shares in the coming generation. I have every faith in the company and mean to be godfather to all the dividends. You*

see I am taking it for granted that she will marry the fellow she ran over. If she doesn't marry him she will need some money of her own all the more. The child says I have poured every good gift into her lap!

"Well, well, I wish I could come back with her, but that tyrant McPherson says no. It will not be long though, Claire, I promise you. I am living on anticipation—unsatisfying fare. You don't suppose, do you, that I shall have to go on living on it? You don't suppose that anything could happen to prevent it? What a worrying old fool I am! Of course it can't and won't.

"Connie is a widow! Perhaps this is not breaking it gently, but personally I think it is excellent news. Chiozzi died from a stab over the heart. He was motoring from Cannes to Monte Carlo at night along the Upper Corniche Road in Mlle. Pauline's car. That is all that is known. The lady, her maid, her car and her chauffeur have vanished. I think Judy prepared you for this. Will you tell Connie? Perhaps she has already heard through her solicitors in Paris. I don't think she will grieve.

"I hope that a telegram to say I am leaving will be the next word you receive from me. Pray that it may. *"Yours,* "STEPHEN."

CHAPTER XXII

JUDY reached London at ten o'clock one night, tired but in the best of spirits. She felt that she was returning, thanks to Stephen, to a new life. Eaton Square no longer seemed to her a prison. Money had opened the doors of that solemn house. Millie's powers of suppression and repression had been lessened. Noel's departure for Germany no longer hung over her like a tragedy. What was there to prevent her going to see him half way through that interminable year?

She felt that she had never appreciated money before. It cut binding ropes like a knife. It gave one seven league boots. A pair of wings, too. People who belittled its powers were either hypocrites or fools. Why did old people prefer to make young people glad when they were dead instead of glad while they were alive?

After helping to disentangle her luggage, Noel took her back to the dark house in Eaton Square. A light had been left burning half way up the stairs, but Millie, as a protest against this trip that she had never approved of—"It isn't as though Mr. de Lisle were a relation," she had frequently said—had gone early to bed, followed by her obedient John.

The two crept up to Judy's room and talked until nearly two. Noel heard all about Cannes and about the people she had met there, including Mr. Colebridge, whom he at once decided he wanted to know.

"He's coming to London in a few days," said Judy, "so your wish may be granted."

Finally he consented to talk about himself. He had heard that afternoon that their departure had been postponed and that they were not leaving for a week—he and his chief with the ridiculous name. He thought he was going to like the job, and it was wonderful how his German was beginning to come back to him at the very thought of the journey.

"The only drawback to the whole thing," he said, "is the feeling that I'm leaving you to fight your battles alone."

That was the moment she had waited for. She told him why she was not utterly dashed to earth by his going. His delight was equal to her own.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Stephen's an old sportsman! I wish there were more like him. I can hardly wait to tell him what I think of him.

Judy, with an income of her own! What will you do with it besides coming to see me?"

She hesitated, and then said flushing but meeting his eyes courageously:

"I'm thinking of marrying Chip with it, Noel."

He wasn't altogether astonished, nor did he pretend to be; but although he had discussed that possibility with her more or less seriously before, he felt he ought now point out its very obvious drawbacks. It would mean an arduous life, with few pleasures.

"I'm almost afraid to encourage you to do it, old girl," he said. "Only I like him so much. He may be a dreamer, and he may be unpractical, and that book of his may not be worth the paper it's written on, for all I know. But I do know that he's one of the very best fellows I ever met. One of the very best. And he's hard hit."

"It's awful—this deciding," said Judy. "That's where Claire and Stephen have the advantage of us. They can just live from day to day and take what the gods bring. And if they don't bring anything—well, they've lived. But this not knowing what to do with your life—this trying to make the most of it and not knowing how—it's hell, sometimes."

"Poor old Judy! 'Standing with reluctant feet——' Is that it? But I know what you mean."

"Tell me," she said, "are you sure, are you absolutely sure that Chip——?"

"Is hard hit? Good Lord! A baby could have seen it. All the same you'll have your work cut out for you. He's so terribly modest. He doesn't seem to think that you or any other woman would give him a thought."

Later she remembered that she had news for him, and wondered how she could have forgotten it.

"Noel, I meant to have told you before. About Chiozzi. You haven't heard, have you?"

"Chiozzi? No. What about him?"

"He's dead. He was stabbed—by that pretty dancer, Mlle. Pauline, they think."

Noel looked concerned.

"That's the worst news I've heard in a long time."

"The worst? What do you mean?"

"It's most upsetting, in fact. Connie told me the other day that Petrovitch's second wife, an American, had just divorced him."

"Well? I'm not surprised at that."

"Well, don't you see? She'll marry Petrovitch now, and be miserable forever after."

"Marry him?" Judy was incredulous. "She wouldn't be such a fool."

"Ho! Wouldn't she? You don't know your Aunt Constance as well as I do. And I won't be here to prevent it. Hang it all! I wish Chiozzi hadn't got himself done in just now."

"Let's not tell her," suggested Judy.

"That's no good. She's probably heard from her solicitors in Paris already. I haven't seen her for two or three days. She's at Eastbourne and won't be back till the day after to-morrow. What's to be done now, I wonder? I never guessed that a fallen aunt would be such a responsibility."

"But," said Judy, "suppose she does marry Petrovitch. Wouldn't that be a solution, in a way?"

Noel's jaw looked uncompromisingly firm at that moment.

"Not in the way I would like. Connie's a fool, but she's not bad. Petrovitch is a brute. If she marries him she's done for, for good."

"Leave it to Claire. She'll find a way to stop it."

"No, she won't. She can't. I've got more influence with Connie than anybody, but if she sees a chance of marrying Petrovitch she won't listen to me, even."

He sat for a moment lost in thought, then looked at his watch.

"Well, this wants thinking out. Get to bed, Judy. You're dead tired. I hope they're pleasant to you at breakfast. They seemed to think you had no right to go away and enjoy yourself."

"What will they say when they hear I've accepted this settlement from Stephen?"

"You leave them to me," he said.

Judy kissed him.

"Good night, you wonderfullest of brothers!"

Three days later, Judy was at Madame Claire's when Mr. Colebridge was announced.

"I knew he'd come," she whispered.

He came, looking exactly as he had looked at Cannes. His heavy and rather expressionless face never lost its look of solemn imperturbability. No smile disturbed his features at sight of Judy, though he could not have known he would meet her there. Madame Claire extended a hand with lace at the wrist.

"Mr. Colebridge! How nice of you to come and see an old lady! I've heard so much about you from Mr. de Lisle and my granddaughter that I feel I know you quite well."

He took her hand.

"It's real kind of you to welcome me like this." He turned to Judy. "Well, Miss Pendleton, I'm glad to see you got here safe and sound. Cannes seemed sorter dead after you left it, so I made up my mind to pull up stakes and quit."

"But you had to come on business," she reminded him.

"That's so. There's a lot of different kinds of business. Seems as if I kinder knew you too, Lady Gregory. Say, I'm just cracked about that old Mr. de Lisle. He sure is a fine old gentleman."

"I think he's rather nice," agreed Madame Claire. "You saw him the most recently. Tell us how he was?"

"Just living for the day when he can get back here. But improving right along. I said to him, 'Mr. de Lisle,' I said, 'I guess you'll pine away if you don't get to London soon.' And that's just what he'd do. He'd pine away. Mind if I smoke a cigar, Lady Gregory?"

"No, no. Do smoke. You were very kind to him and to Judy there. She's told me about the delightful trips you took."

"Well, say, it was a pleasure. I don't take much stock in scenery. I like to have folks to talk to. Maybe we can take some rides around London later on, Miss Pendleton."

Judy was surprised. Surely she had made herself clear. Or was it that he merely wished to continue friendly relations? She replied evasively, and Madame Claire changed the subject for her.

"How long will you be in London?" she asked.

"A matter of six months or so, I shouldn't wonder. I'm not figuring on going back just yet. We've got some factories over here that I want to look into, and I may run over to Paris later on."

"Do you know London at all?"

"No, but my chauffeur does, so I don't worry. I picked up an English chauffeur in Cannes, Miss Pendleton. The French fellow I had wouldn't leave his wife and family, and anyway, he didn't speak any language that I could understand. But with this English chauffeur, if I listen real carefully, I can pick up a word now and then."

They laughed at this. Madame Claire felt that she was going to enjoy Mr. Colebridge.

"You seem to be interested in a great many things," she remarked presently. "Didn't I understand Judy to say that the theater was one of them?'

"Only from a business point of view," he explained. "I don't claim to know anything about the stage. But when I see that a certain theater is about to go smash because it's been managed by a lot of bone-heads, why, I don't mind lending a hand. I practically own one in New York, and one in Cincinnati. There's another one in New York that looks like getting into difficulties pretty soon."

"Ah! And then you step in. But does that mean that you can put on certain plays, and have an actual voice in the production of them?"

"Well, I don't concern myself much with that side of it. I don't know a good play from a bad one. I like a good lively show now and then. But if I wanted a certain play put on, I'd get it put on, all right."

Judy wondered why it was that financial weight and an understanding of the arts so seldom went hand in hand. Madame Claire pursued a line of thought of her own for a moment or two while Mr. Colebridge enlarged upon his powers.

And then, most unexpectedly, Dawson opened the door and announced Major Crosby.

How strange that those two men should meet, thought Judy! She remembered telling Claire in one of her letters that it was impossible to imagine two men less alike. And now that she saw them together she knew that what she had said was true.

Major Crosby was introduced to Mr. Colebridge, who was pleased to make his acquaintance, and Madame Claire ordered tea.

"This is a wonderful afternoon for me," she said. "I don't often have so many visitors. It's very exciting."

It didn't take Chip more than a second or two to place the other caller. Judy had mentioned an American she had met in Cannes, and lo! Here he was. She had only been home two or three days. He hadn't waited very long before following after. Judy tried to talk to him, but Mr. Colebridge had the floor and meant to keep it. Chip retired into his shell—that haven of refuge from which he seldom advanced very far in company—and contented himself with looking and listening. He looked chiefly at Judy. She was looking very lovely, he thought. No wonder that people followed her from Cannes to London. Powerful, authoritative-looking people, who booked large outside cabins on ocean liners as a matter of course, and always gravitated to the most expensive hotels. What a fool he had been! This man could give her everything. Why not, as he seemed to own it? What was he saying?

"So I told them I wasn't having any. I told them I had all the irons in the fire I wanted. It was a good thing all right, but say, what's the good of any more money to me? I've got all I want right now. And if I ever do make any more, it will be just to turn it over to my wife if I've got one"—he looked straight at Judy as he said it—"and say, 'There you are. It's yours to do as you like with. Throw it away, spend it, it's all the same to me. So long as you have a good time with it, and it makes you happy.' "

"And of course it will," said Judy with faint sarcasm.

"Sure it will," he agreed, taking her words at their face value. "I guess it's what every woman wants. Isn't that so, Lady Gregory?"

Madame Claire regarded him seriously.

"You never can tell, Mr. Colebridge," she said. "Women are the most unaccountable creatures. Sometimes it takes more than money to make them happy."

"Oh, well," Mr. Colebridge defended the sex, "when it comes to unreasonableness, I guess men aren't all reasonable either."

Judy glanced at Chip, hoping to catch a twinkle of amusement in his eye, but he was looking at Mr. Colebridge.

Chip stayed for an hour or more, saying very little, seeming to prefer listening to talking.

"You make me such very short visits," complained Madame Claire when he got up to go. "I hardly have time to say five words to you before you're off again. But perhaps you'll pay me another visit soon."

"My plans are rather unsettled just now," said Chip vaguely. "May I ring you up one day?"

"Yes, do."

He turned to Judy.

"Tell me," she asked as she took his hand, "are you prefectly well again? No more of those headaches?"

"Oh, yes, I'm as well as ever, thank you. I've almost forgotten that it ever happened—I mean as far as the injuries are concerned."

Judy smiled at him, sorry because she knew he felt he had said something stupid.

"Noel wants to see you, too. We must meet again soon."

"I want to see him. I'll write. It's just possible that I may go away soon, but I'll let you know."

He said good-by to Mr. Colebridge, who shook him by the hand, and in a moment he was gone.

"Could anything," Judy asked herself, "be more unsatisfactory?"

She stayed half an hour longer, hoping for a few words alone with Madame Claire, but as Mr. Colebridge made no move she presently got up to go.

"Good-by, Claire, dear. Let me know the moment you get a wire from Stephen."

Mr. Colebridge also rose.

"My car's outside," he said. "I trust you'll allow me to drop you at your home, Miss Pendleton."

She was about to refuse on the grounds that she wanted a walk, but thought better of it. It would be a good opportunity for a few words with him. She kissed Madame Claire, and Mr. Colebridge, after announcing his intention of coming again soon, followed her out.

The same car, a different chauffeur, and very different surroundings. Mr. Colebridge, however, was as unchanged as his car.

"That's a lovely old lady," he remarked as they left the hotel.

"Isn't she wonderful?"

"I hope," he said, "that we can sorter meet there often. I don't mind telling you, Miss Pendleton, that when I say I'm here on business, that business is partly you. I don't get easily cast down. I kinder bob up again. Now," he went on as she tried to interrupt, "I hope, little girl, that you're going to reconsider. I'm here to try to persuade you to reconsider."

"It's quite out of the question, Mr. Colebridge. I told you so before. Do, please, believe me this time."

"It's that voice of yours that gets me," he replied. "You'd make a hit in America, all right."

"You're hopeless!" she exclaimed. "I simply don't understand American men. But perhaps they're not all like you. You won't *learn* anything! It's like . . . it's like trying to teach an elephant to dance."

"Go ahead. Don't mind me."

"Very well, I will. The trouble with you is, you've no diffidence. You've never tried to see yourself as others see you. You're just Mr. Whitman Colebridge of Cincinnati—wherever that is—and you're worth I don't know and don't care how much, and as far as you're concerned, that's enough. You've never asked yourself if you lack anything. You're perfectly satisfied with yourself as you are. Perfectly. Isn't that true?"

He considered this, studying the end of a fresh cigar.

"I can't see," he said, "that I'm any worse than the general run."

"No. You don't see. You don't see anything that isn't business. You've gone through life like a rocket, with a good deal of noise and a lot of speed, and that's all."

"Well, there's no harm in a rocket," he said easily. "It gives people something to look at, and it's real pretty when it bursts."

Judy laughed helplessly.

"Perhaps if you'd do the same I might like you better. But at present you're so swollen with success that you're intolerable."

"Bully for you! That was straight from the shoulder."

"But what's the good of it? It goes in one ear and out the other. Well, here's something that will stick, perhaps. You met a Major Crosby at my grandmother's this afternoon."

"That his name? Quiet sorter fellow."

"Yes. I'm going to marry him."

She watched his face and saw that not a muscle of it changed.

"That so? I guessed there must be some one.

Well, you won't hear me squeal. You've been fair and square with me, and I guess I can take my medicine."

"Now I'm beginning to like you better. I've liked some things about you all the time, even when you irritated me most. I'm sorry we can't be friends, but I see that's out of the question too."

"I'm not so sure. I'll just stick around for a while and see what happens, anyhow. You're the first woman who's ever taken enough interest in me to criticize me, and I think it's a hopeful sign. You engaged to that fellow?"

They had reached the house in Eaton Square.

"That," she said, shaking hands with him, "I prefer not to say."

"Oh, well," he answered, returning to the car, "I just kinder thought I'd ask."

CHAPTER XXIII

Judy knocked on Noel's bedroom door before dinner the following evening, and was invited to enter.

"What's up?" asked Noel, who was sorting ties and socks.

"This," she answered, displaying a letter. "The most disgusting thing's happened."

"What is it? It looks like Chip's writing."

"It is. I told you he called on Claire yesterday when I was there, and met Mr. Colebridge."

"Yes."

"Well, he seems to have jumped to conclusions. Listen to this. I'll read it to you.

" 'Dear Miss Pendleton,

" 'I think I told you about a cottage my mother owned in Cornwall. It's a very remote, quiet little place, and I've found it very useful at different times. I think it will exactly suit my present mood, and I'm going down there by an early train to-morrow. I hope to be able to finish the book there. I don't seem to have been able to get on with it lately.

" 'I want to thank you again for all your kindness to me, kindness that few people would have shown to a careless individual who got in the way of their car. I shall never forget it. There was a time——'

"Then," she broke off, "he goes on to say something about having been foolish enough to hope something or other—I'll skip that. Then:

" 'I think that your days of freedom and happiness are just beginning, and I hope with all my heart that you may find in your marriage all that you have so far missed in life. You will be marrying a man who can give you everything—all the good things that are so obviously yours by right.

" 'Will you say good-by to your brother for me? He has given me his address in Germany, and I mean to write to him there.

" 'This is a stupid, stilted letter, but I feel confident that you will understand the much that it fails to say, and forgive it its shortcomings.

" 'Always yours sincerely,
" 'ANDREW CROSBY."

"Dated yesterday," she added. She put the letter back into its envelope. "He must have left for Cornwall early this morning."

Noel whistled.

"Mr. Colebridge must have been a bit forthcoming yesterday."

"Forthcoming isn't the word for it. He talked about the money he would give his wife, and looked straight at me—oh, isn't it maddening! I wouldn't have had this happen for anything!"

"Have you told Claire?"

"Yes. I took the letter there as soon as it came."

"What did she say?"

"A good deal, but I don't see how I can possibly act on her advice. She says that if I don't go to Cornwall and straighten things out with him, I'm a fool. She has a horror of misunderstandings. She begged me to go."

"But, hang it all! You can't go alone. If it weren't for this German trip, I——" He broke off, frowning. "So she thinks you ought to go down there?"

"She was most emphatic about it."

"Let's see—what day is to-day? By Jove, Judy! There's time if we go to-morrow. What do you say? Shall we?"

"Oh, Noel! I don't know what to say. I do want to talk to him. I couldn't write anything—that would mean anything. I'd have to see him. What do you think?"

"I think old Claire's pretty generally right."

"Then—shall we go?"

"I'm ready if you are," he replied. "I'd like to see old Chip again myself. It means the ten-thirty from Paddington, you know."

"What will the family say?" Judy asked him. "Oh, well, let them say it! I knew I could count on you, Noel!"

* * * * * *

Once in the swift and inexorable train, Judy was assailed with doubts. What was she doing? Should she have let things take their own course? Would it have been wiser to have stayed at home, and to have written Chip a letter?

Noel, observing her restlessness and guessing the cause, told her he had won five pounds at bridge the day before, and that if she wanted to pull the emergency cord and get out, he'd pay. But when she asked him point blank, "Tell me, do you think I'm acting like a fool?" he replied, "No, like a human being," and she felt calmer then and read her magazine.

But panic overwhelmed her once more in the jolting Ford with flapping side curtains that took them from the inn in West Perranpool to Cliff Cottage, where Chip lived.

"Why did we come?" she cried.

"Because," said Noel, the comforter, "I wanted to see Chip again before I went to Germany, and I brought you with me. And besides, I saw his doctor again the other day, and he said that what Chip needed more than anything was cheering up. He said he'd been rather depressed since the accident. So stop agonizing about it."

She stopped agonizing after that, and watched the thin rain of early spring that slanted steadily down from a darkening sky. The bleak landscape had a peculiar charm. So, too, had the lonely, white cottages they passed, their undrawn curtains showing fiery painted walls, for dusk was upon them. They climbed a little hill and pulled up sharply at the door of a low house that looked at the sea from its dormer windows. Lights burned there, too. The driver of the Ford had assured them that Major Crosby would be in, because, he said, there was never anything to go out for. They told him to wait, and knocked at the door.

Chip opened it himself. It was just dark enough to make it difficult for him to recognize them, but when he did he was almost overcome with surprise and pleasure. He stammered. He shook hands twice over. He shut the door too quickly behind them—as though, Judy thought, he were afraid they might go out again—and caught her skirt in it, at which they all laughed. He pushed every chair in the room toward the fire, as if they were capable of sitting in more than one apiece.

"This is glorious!" he cried. "I can hardly believe it! I never dreamed of it. You must stay to supper. No, I'm not my own cook; I'd starve if I were. There's a Cornish char here somewhere. I'll tell her."

He rushed off, and they heard him giving excited and confused directions in the kitchen. Then he rushed back.

"I'm going to send the car away. It's only a mile to the inn. I'll walk back with you after supper. You're angels from heaven, both of you. There's only fish and eggs and cheese. Can you bear that?"

Judy saw a new Chip—a happy, hopeful one. Excitement and wholly unexpected pleasure gave him confidence. He asked a hundred questions. He made Judy take off her hat and coat and carried them away into his room. He replenished the fire and hurled into it some papers that had been lying on the table.

"I was trying to write a letter," he explained. Judy thought she saw her name on a blackening sheet before it puffed into flame. Another letter, to her? Was he dissatisfied, perhaps, with the letter he had written her before leaving London? How little he had guessed, while writing it, that he would be interrupted half way through it, and by her. His eyes shone, and his undisciplined hair stood up at the back like a schoolboy's. He didn't know or care. He was happy.

There in that cottage room, Judy felt the influence of the woman who had furnished it. She had put into it all the little personal odds and ends that she had loved. There was her work table, there her favorite chair. There was the writing table where she had sat penning the novels that had educated her son. Novels, Chip had said, that she would have hated. But he was wrong. There, on the mantelpiece with its tasseled, red velvet draping, were pictures of Chip as a baby, as a schoolboy, as a youth at Sandhurst, where he had acquired that absurd nickname of his, and as a First Lieutenant about to take his part in the South African war, from which campaign he had returned to find her gone. He had left everything as she had left it, and Judy was disposed to love him for it. Books were scattered about the room, and it had the air of being much lived in and much worked in.

It was easy enough for him to talk to-day. His reserve seemed to have melted away from him. Had he heard anything more from Helen about meeting influential people, Judy asked? No, he hadn't. She had forgotten all about it, no doubt. He was rather relieved that she had.

"People have no time for failures," Chip said, "and quite right too. A man who has reached the age of forty-four without accomplishing anything is a failure."

"That's tosh!" said Noel. "Every one's a failure at some time of their lives. The thing is to see that it isn't chronic."

The old Cornish woman came in and laid the table for supper, bringing with her an extra lamp. She seemed very pleased that the Major had company, and looked approvingly at Judy. They sat down presently to a savory meal, and she waited on them with enthusiasm, putting in a word now and then.

Chip talked of the country round about.

"It's beautiful," he said, "if you happen to like these rather bleak and open places. I do, myself."

"So do I," agreed Judy. "But I love trees, too; although I think treeless places are better for one. I always imagine I can think better where there aren't many trees. Perhaps they have thoughts of their own, and they get mixed up with our thoughts."

"Well, one can think here," Chip said. "There are some fine walks, too. I'll take you for a walk over the cliffs to-morrow, if it's not too cold and windy."

"We'll come over after breakfast," said Noel. "You might walk half way and meet us, Chip."

"Right!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "I'll start out at about half-past nine."

After supper they sat by the fire and talked until Judy grew so sleepy that she said she'd never be able to get to the inn if they didn't start at once.

When they went out they found it had stopped raining, but there was a high wind blowing. It roared high up over their heads most of the time, every now and then swooping down upon them and shaking their clothes, then going crazily off to roar above their heads again. The moon looked out occasionally through gaps in the flying clouds. A wild night that made the blood go faster. The road was rough and stony and in order to be guided better, Judy passed one arm through Chip's and the other through Noel's, and they walked abreast. She felt Chip straighten suddenly when she put her arm through his, and for some moments he walked without speaking, holding her arm rigidly as though he were abnormally conscious of her touch.

He said good night to them at the door of the inn—a mere whitewashed cottage, much added on to—and Judy marveled at the change in his face when the light fell on it from the open door—the change wrought in it by a few hours of happiness. It seemed to her that it was a different being who had stared out at them from his own door earlier that evening.

"Good night," he said for the third time. "I won't try to thank you for coming. I can't."

And he vanished abruptly into the darkness.

* * * * * *

"The question before the house," said Noel the next morning at breakfast, "is this: how am I going to lose myself to-day?"

"Oh, no!" cried Judy in a panic at the thought. "You're not to, Noel. Please don't leave me. I've quite changed my mind. I think it's much better to let things take their own course."

"All right, let them," he agreed. "All I mean to do is to clear the course a bit. It's going to be rather difficult. I think I'd better leave it to the inspiration of the moment."

He said no more about it, and promptly at half-past nine they left the inn together and made their way toward Cliff Cottage. They had gone less than half way, however, when they met Chip walking toward them with long strides.

"Good morning!" he called out. "Did you sleep well?"

"We never slept better," answered Judy, "and I feel as if I could walk twenty miles."

"So do I," said Noel, "but all the walking I shall do this morning will be to the post office and back."

"Why?" exclaimed the other two.

"It's my own fault. I never sent the Chief word that I wouldn't be in town to-day. Clean forgot it. I'll send him a wire to say what time I'll be back to-morrow. Then I must write one or two letters I won't have another chance to write before I go off on Thursday. Anyhow, I'll meet you at the inn at one. You're lunching with us to-day, Chip. Well," as he turned to leave them, "have a good walk. So long!"

They stood watching his thin, upright figure. That empty sleeve of his, tucked into the pocket of his coat, did not affect his easy, swinging walk. He ignored it himself so utterly that he made other people ignore it too. They waited until he looked back and waved at them, and then they started on their way.

"I almost believed him myself," thought Judy, admiring the ease with which he had taken himself off.

"Your brother Noel," said Chip, "is the best fellow I've ever known."

Appreciation of Noel always touched Judy to the quick.

"You don't know how that pleases me!" she cried. "I'm so glad you feel that. There's no one like him."

"You are like him," said Chip quietly.

"I wish I were more like him."

For a while they walked on without speaking.

"Chip," said Judy at last, "I'm going to call you that. I have for a long time in my own mind and to Noel. Please treat me like an old friend and tell me about yourself and your plans. Don't let's be reserved with each other. There's so much I want to know about you. I promise you there's nothing I would hesitate to tell you about myself, and I wish you would feel that you could discuss anything with me."

"I will," he replied. "I do."

They still had with them the high wind of the night before. It was fresh and bracing, but not cold, and it carried with it a smell of the sea and of the turf, wet with yesterday's rain.

"Tell me, then. What do you mean to do now?"

"Finish the book, first of all. Beyond that I've no plans at all. The worst of it is, I've rather lost faith in it lately. I suppose one is apt to feel like that, after working on a thing for twelve years. Now that it's nearly done, I want to chuck the whole blessed thing into the fire. It would give me a queer sort of satisfaction to see it burn. Remorse and despair would follow, of course."

"Kindly resist any such impulse," she said.

"Oh, I shan't give in to it, I promise you."

"It's all wrong for you to live alone as you do," Judy told him. "Only people who are very socially inclined ought to live alone, for they'd take good care not to be alone any more than they could help. I think loneliness is paralyzing."

"I believe it is," he agreed.

"Very well then. You must stop living this hermit's life."

"That," he said smiling, "isn't as easy as it sounds."

"It's fairly easy, I think. You must marry."

Chip had no reply to make to that for some time. They walked on, along a path that bordered the turfy cliff. The sea, its grayness whipped by the wind into lines of white foam that advanced and retreated, was worrying the rocks below them. Gulls flashed silver white against a low and frowning sky. The day suited her mood. She felt bold, braced by the wind and the sea. The high cliffs gave her courage. The space gave her freedom.

"For that," Chip said at last, "two things are necessary. The first is love; the second is the means to keep that love from perishing."

"Once you possess the first," said Judy, "you have more power to gain the second."

"But I don't possess it."

"Do you mean that you have never loved any one?"

"I mean that no one does or could care for me."

"I wish you hadn't said that," she told him, turning her head to meet his eyes.

"Why? It's the truth."

"No, it isn't the truth. Besides, no man ought to be as humble as that. It's all wrong. You have never tried to make any one love you. Have you?"

"No."

"Then how can you possibly know?"

"I have no right to try."

"As much right as any other man. More than most."

"No, no! You don't understand. You're forgetting that——"

"I wonder," interrupted Judy, "how many other men and women have had this same argument? The woman putting love first, the man money. Or vice versa. You, evidently, put money first."

This was more than he could bear.

"Don't say that!" he broke out. "Say that I put love first, every time, and that I would sacrifice everything for it and to it, rather than do it less than justice. A man has no right to snatch at love, regardless of the consequences. To put it first is sometimes the supremest selfishness. It's putting oneself first, one's own gain and good first."

"You're perfectly right, Chip," she answered. "I know you're right. Only, if by putting it first you were adding to some one else's happiness . . . instead of taking away from it . . ."

She saw his lips tighten.

"I am only hurting him," she thought. "It would be better to speak out."

"Chip," she said at last, "I want to talk to you about your letter. The one you wrote before coming down here. You evidently took it for granted I was going to marry Mr. Colebridge, and that soon. Don't you think you rather jumped to conclusions? Because I've no intention of marrying Mr. Colebridge, now or later. What made you think I had?"

"He did."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there he was—rich, successful, influential. A man of standing and power . . . and in love with you . . . as any one could see. He had followed you from the South of France . . . you were together at Lady Gregory's . . . it all seemed so perfectly natural . . . and suitable . . ."

"You think it would have been suitable?"

"From a worldly point of view, yes. Though I prefer not to say what was going on in my mind. . . ."

"And you think my point of view is a wholly worldly one?"

"I never said that!"

"You practically did. You must have thought it. I thought you knew me better than that."

"I saw no reason to suppose that you would have chosen him merely from worldly motives.

I judged him to be kind, generous, honest—a man a woman might be very fond of——"

"What sort of a woman? My sort?"

"I didn't argue about it. I accepted it. There it was. I believed you had decided to marry him. I knew that if you had done so, you must have had good reasons for it. I was prepared to believe you were acting for . . . for the best."

"What else was going on in your mind as you sat there? You were very quiet."

"I would rather not say."

"You understand that I am not going to marry him?"

"I do, and I—selfishly and unreasonably—I can't help being thankful. That's only human, I suppose. But even if I had known it that day, I think I would have made up my mind to come here just the same."

"But why?"

"I think you must know why."

Very gently and quietly said. One might speak so to a child who asks foolish and tactless questions. Oh, Claire! It's all very well, thought Judy, to say, have it out with him, but what would you do yourself, if you were gently put aside like that, and chidden a little? "I think you must know why." As if to say, "And now let's hear no more about it." Claire had spoken as if it were going to be the easiest thing in the world to have it out with him! . . .

They rounded a curve in the path then and Judy cried out at the beauty of the view. Far below them the sea pounded and foamed. The cliffs fell away with a sheer drop that gave her an uneasy sensation of falling, for an instant, and the wind buffeted them with such violence that Chip took her by the arm and drew her back from the path that ran dangerously close to the edge. For a moment, speech was impossible.

"Can't we sit somewhere," she cried, when she could get her breath, "out of the wind?"

He pointed to a great bowlder that overhung the path a dozen yards ahead, and they struggled toward it and crept into its shelter. There the wind rushed by them but did not disturb them.

"That's better," she said. "I can talk now without shouting."

"And I can smoke," said Chip, filling a pipe, "which is a great help."

"I said a few minutes ago," she told him quietly, "that there was nothing I would hesitate to tell you about myself. I mean to prove, now, that I'm as good as my word. I can't see that we gain anything by . . . not speaking out to each other. We're both very inclined to be reserved, and to-day . . . to-day that sort of thing seems to me very petty and artificial."

He turned and looked at her, smiling.

"You could never be either petty or artificial."

"Yes, I could. I have been. But I don't mean to be so with you. What will you think of me, Chip, if I tell you that I know . . . yes, I know . . . that you need me . . . badly, and that I believe . . . I know . . . that I need you."

Her voice was unsteady, in spite of her courage.

"I think," he answered in a low voice, "that it is your divine kindness that makes you say that to me. I think you say it because you know well enough that there's nothing on earth I would rather hear."

But he did not dare to look at her, and stared out at the sea with his pipe between his teeth.

Judy laughed. A rather helpless laugh, with something of exasperation in it.

"Kindness! Oh, no. It's not that at all. I'll tell you what it is. I'm telling you this because I'm one of those women who are possessed of an insatiable vanity. I'm trying to make you say things of the same sort to me. I exact it from every man. I like being made love to, on general principles. I took the trouble to come down to

Cornwall to see you because I hoped to sit with you under this rock and be made love to. Do you believe me?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, it's quite as true as that I said what I did just now out of kindness. Kindness! I . . . I could shake you!"

His face was very troubled.

"Don't you see that I cannot—I dare not—put any other interpretation on it? You still feel an interest in the man who nearly fell under your wheels that night. You want to know that he is not . . . not too unhappy. You want to leave him feeling that he can count on your friendship—and he does, and will. And that is all. It is a great deal."

"I think you are the most annoying, insulting, irritating of men! I don't know why I came all this way to see you and talk to you . . . except that I had to, Chip. Do you hear me? I had to!"

"Judy," he said, looking at her with eyes that seemed not to see her, "I am perfectly certain of one thing. And that is, that if by some miracle you could, that you must not . . . you must not . . . care for me. But you cannot, you cannot!"

He put out his hand toward her, gropingly, and she took it.

"And I am equally certain of one thing, and that is that you care for me. And I tell you, Chip, I don't care twopence for your self-respect, or whatever you call it, that you think so much of. And I care even less for my own, at the moment. And I am tired of your loneliness—your awful loneliness—and I am tired to death of my own loneliness. And I am tired of hearing you call yourself a failure, and I am frightened of being a failure myself—and only you can save me from it. Only you! And if you talk any more nonsense about my kindness now . . ."

"Judy!" he cried, in a voice that was like a warning. "Judy!"

"Yes. I've done a dreadful thing. I know I have. And I don't care. I want you to tell me all the things you haven't dared to tell me yet. I want to hear them all . . . now. Are you going to tell me, Chip? Are you?"

She was half frightened when she saw the look of exaltation on his face. It was his great—his supreme moment. The moment that comes once to nearly every man, of awe and ecstasy.

"God forgive me!" he cried. "I will!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Connie, of late, had been giving much thought to Petrovitch.

That gentleman was well aware that she avoided seeing him because her nephew had persuaded her to do so, and he was not pleased. There were other things that did not please him. His concerts had been less successful than they should have been—was it possible that his popularity was on the wane?—and his wealthy American wife, who, up till now, had been very prodigal with her money, had just obtained a divorce from him. He had believed all along that she would relent. However, the thing that most seriously disquieted him was the unsatisfactory condition of the box office returns. He accused his manager of failing to advertise. He said unkind things of the British public. He said there wasn't a decent hall in London, from the point of view of acoustics, and lastly he claimed that the food offered to him at the many houses where he was entertained, was abominable, and was ruining his digestion.

He began writing letters to Connie, accusing her, tenderly and regretfully, of faithlessness. He wrote in French, as that language enabled him to use the endearing "tu" that Connie, he knew of old, found irresistible. As she had made no promises concerning letters, she felt free to exchange them with him as frequently as she desired.

"I am now," he wrote her one day, *"a free man. My wife has seen fit to divorce me, and I do not regret it. Like most American and English women (to this rule, you, my beautiful Connie, are a notable exception) she must have her husband tied to her apron string. He must have no existence of his own. I—I with my talents, my work that is my life, I, if you please, must remain in America at her side! She could not share me with the world. It is not enough for her that she is the wife of Illiodor Petrovitch. He must be a tame bear to perform tricks for her. Ah, Connie, you understood! You, and only you, are a fit companion for a man like myself, a man who cannot, who must not, even when he would, be put in chains. Yet even you chained me once, but only with your love. And I worshiped those chains. I would have bound them round me the more closely, but my work was a cruel master*

and bade me leave you, and though my heart broke, I obeyed. Yet, knowing this, knowing that all my life I have regretted those sweet chains and longed for them again, knowing this, you keep aloof. You refuse to see me. You permit me to suffer at your hands. Why? Tell me why, my beautiful Connie? You are not indifferent to me. You were moved that first day. I saw all that. Well then, why?"

He wrote many such letters, and she answered them, and told him of promises made to her relations, of obligations. She never mentioned Noel. She said that life was very cruel, and that she did not want to hurt him. He would never know, she said, what it cost her to refuse to see him.

When she wrote him of Chiozzi's sudden end, he at once saw the finger of fate. They were both free. Here was the advertising he needed. In these days of vulgar competition such means were not to be despised. He would marry Connie. That old affair of theirs would be resurrected. So much the better. A romance if you like. Connie was now a Countess, and that also was to the good. The papers would seize upon it with joy. The news would travel before him to America and pave the way for his next concert tour there.

His late wife would be chagrined at this speedy remarriage. Everything was for the best.

He wrote Connie an impassioned letter. He said that he lived but to make her his wife. That he longed to make up to her for any injustice his duty might have forced him to do her in the past. The way was clear now. It was written. He laid his name, his fame, the devotion of a lifetime, at her feet.

Connie was not of the stuff that could resist such an appeal. She was dazzled. Like many women who have once dispensed with the formality of marriage, she had an almost superstitious respect for it. It would reinstate her in the eyes of the world. It would prove that old affair to have been indeed a great love. Illiodor would never leave her again. They would grow old together. Not even Noel could raise the faintest objection to anything so peculiarly respectable.

Judy and Noel returned from Cornwall on the night train, and on Wednesday morning—they had been gone since Monday—Noel, fearing the worst, went straight to Connie and found that events had shaped themselves exactly as he had anticipated.

"Connie," he told Judy later, "looked like a cat who has eaten the canary."

When Noel was very angry he was very concise, and he was now in a very fine anger indeed.

"It is quite true," he said, "that you made no promises about letters. What you promised me was to have nothing further to do with him. When you gave me your word to give him up, it meant just that. You did not give him up. You corresponded with him secretly. I thought you still had a spark of loyalty in you. I counted on that. It was my mistake. If you want to go to the devil, you may."

He picked up his hat. Connie, who had subsided into a chair, gave a wail of dismay, and running to the door put her back against it.

"Noel! What do you mean? You can't go away and leave me like this. I thought—I thought you would be—well, if not exactly pleased, at least reconciled. He is going to marry me. We are both free now. It was wrong of me to write to him. I didn't realize it at the time, but I do now. I am sorry!"

Noel stood looking at her as she leaned against the door. Was she worth making further efforts for? Poor old Connie! She would go to the devil now and no mistake! Those pretty, pale blue eyes and that weak mouth had defeated him.

"There's nothing more to be said," he replied more gently. "You've made your choice. I'm leaving for Germany to-morrow, as you know. So, good-by, Connie."

Tears again. She wouldn't take his hand but clung instead to his arm, sobbing. There was a knock at the door. Noel opened it, expecting to see Petrovitch. But it was Madame Claire.

She stood there smiling, observing Connie's tears and Noel's anger. She leaned with one hand upon her ebony stick. With the other hand she held about her the folds of a long, fur-trimmed cape.

"Claire!" exclaimed Noel. "You out, and at this time of day? This is marvelous!"

"I wanted to see Connie," said Madame Claire, kissing her daughter on the cheek. "Good morning, my dear. I hope you are properly flattered at such a visit. I don't often get out as early as this. In fact I don't often get out at all, these days. Were you going, Noel?"

"Yes," he answered. "Connie has just informed me of her approaching nuptials. I'll leave the congratulations to you."

"I can't bear him to leave me like this!" cried Connie. "He won't listen to me. I don't believe he wants me to be happy!"

"Just a moment, Noel," said Madame Claire. "May I have a word in your private ear? You won't mind, will you, Connie?"

They went a few paces down the hall, away from the sitting room door.

"Connie wrote me about it last night," said Madame Claire. "I received her note this morning. I had an idea you would be here, and I meant to kill two birds with one stone if possible. I suppose she's serious about this . . . this marriage?"

"Oh, she means to marry him right enough," said Noel, "and I don't see any way of preventing it. Short of fighting a duel. Hang it all——!"

"I wonder," interrupted Madame Claire speaking very slowly and thoughtfully, "I wonder whatever became of that little German wife of his?"

"The one he had when he ran off with Connie? Dead, I suppose. Or divorced."

"I think neither," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I had some correspondence with her at the time," said Madame Claire, tracing a pattern on the carpet with her stick. "It was after Leonard Humphries was killed in South Africa. I wrote to her—by an odd coincidence I found out where she lived—and asked her if she would divorce Petrovitch. I have her answer here." She touched the bag she carried. "She lived in an obscure village in South Germany, was an ardent Roman Catholic, and of course had no intention of divorcing him. She went on to say that it was also extremely unlikely that she would die, as she came of a long-lived family and enjoyed excellent health. It was really quite an amusing letter. I think the woman had character. And I think she still has."

She looked up at him as she leaned on her stick.

"What do you think?"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Noel. "A bigamist, eh? Claire, you're a double-eyed sorceress. I believe there's something in it. Will you give me the letter?"

"I will." She took it out of her bag and gave it to him.

"Don't say anything to Connie yet. I'm going to try a bit of bluff on old What's-His-Name. Of course she may be dead as mutton, but on the other hand she may not, as you say. Claire, you are——" Words failed him.

"It's very interesting," remarked Madame Claire. "Be careful of Petrovitch, and don't say anything libelous. See what you can find out.

But I can trust you to manage the affair. By the way, is Judy——?"

Noel nodded, smiling.

"Bless her! That's really delightful! Stephen will be so pleased. I dare say I shall see her this afternoon."

She returned to Connie, and Noel, much excited, made his way with all speed to Claridge's, reading the letter as he went. At the hotel he wrote on his card:

"I would like to see you on a matter that concerns you and your immediate plans."

In a few moments he was shown upstairs to Petrovitch's rooms.

Petrovitch was standing frowning at the card in the middle of a large and beautifully furnished sitting room. He threw up his head as an animal does when Noel entered, and his protruding lips widened in an unpleasant smile.

"Ah! It is the nephew! The charming aunt's charming nephew. I guessed as much. Well? You have come to say, 'Hands off!' eh? Am I right?"

"Perfectly correct," said Noel. "That saves me a lot of trouble. I merely dropped in to let you know that the marriage will not take place."

"Ah!" cried Petrovitch, rubbing his hands. "That is good. That is excellent. You are—what do they say—the heavy father, eh? The Countess, you will say, is not of age. She does not know her mind." He laughed mirthlessly. "Well, I will risk all that, venerable sir!"

"You'll be risking more than that," said Noel evenly. "By the way, may I sit down? I think if we both sit down—thank you. As I said before, I simply came in to tell you that the marriage will not take place. I expect you to give me your word of honor before I leave this room that you will not attempt to see Countess Chiozzi again on any pretext whatsoever."

"My good young man," said Petrovitch, too much amused to be angry, "I will see your aunt, Countess Chiozzi, where and when I please, and I will marry her by special license the day after to-morrow. What have you to say to that?"

"Only that it will have to be a very special license."

"I do not know what you mean by that. But one thing I do know very well, and that is that even if I did not wish to marry your aunt before, I would do so now simply because you do not wish it. I do not speak English well, but I think I have made my meaning clear, eh?"

"Quite clear. I hope you are as well acquainted with the English law as you are with the English language."

"And why should I know English law?"

Was he looking the least bit uncomfortable? Noel prayed that no sign, no clue might escape him.

"It might come in useful. We're a funny people. To run off with some one else's wife is not, of course, a criminal offense. But there is one thing that the law absolutely draws the line at. I wonder if you know what that one thing is?"

"I do not know," said Petrovitch looking at his watch, "and neither do I care. I am to meet your delightful aunt at her hotel at one o'clock, and it is now a quarter to that hour. If you will excuse me——"

"In connection with that thing that I have not yet named," went on Noel, "I want you to know that I am going to Germany at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Here are my passports."

Touché! There was not the slightest doubt about it now. Petrovitch was on his feet, his heavy head down like that of a charging buffalo, his brows drawn together, his lips thrust out.

"What do you mean, you——"

His hands gripped the chair back. Noel went on in that casual, calm way of his.

"Look here, Petrovitch, I'm not going to make a row if I can help it. I hate the whole business. You leave Connie alone, and you'll never hear of this again. Only—I know what I know, and if you force me to do it, I'll be obliged to produce all the necessary proofs, and you'll be—dished. It's an ugly affair, and it would mean I don't know how many years for you. Candidly now, is it worth it?"

Petrovitch went a queer color and sat down suddenly. He had evidently changed his mind about throwing anything. Noel felt drunk with the wine of complete and unexpected success. He wondered what he would have done in Petrovitch's place, and decided that he would have brazened it out to the very end. Not so Petrovitch, evidently. His rage had gone as quickly as it had come. But what Noel saw in his face was not fear. No, it was certainly not fear. What was it?

Petrovitch stared at him for some moments, and then said quite simply:

"She is alive, then?"

"Great snakes!" Noel said to himself. "Perhaps I've brought her to life!" But his brain worked quickly. He touched his pocket.

"I have a letter from her here," he said.

Petrovitch did not even ask to see it.

"Where is she?"

"In the same old place. She has never been out of it all these years. Why don't you go there and look her up the next chance you get? Do you know"—he drew his chair forward an inch or two—"I believe she's still fond of you?"

Petrovitch straightened himself and passed a hand over his forehead.

"I wrote her many letters. She has never replied. I thought she—I believed she was dead. During the war I could not go to Germany. I have not heard from her in twelve years."

"Well, you see," said Noel, "she hadn't every reason to be pleased with you, had she? You know what wives are."

The man was almost himself again. He shrugged his shoulders and thrust out his hands.

"I know what all women are."

Noel nodded.

"True. Perfectly true. Well . . . she's been a good wife to you, Petrovitch. She's let you go your own way, she's never bothered you. If you were to go back to her, I believe she'd welcome you with open arms."

"My poor Freda. . . . I believe she would. She was a good woman, a good wife. Little Freda! Some day, who knows?"

"Who knows?" echoed Noel. "You might do worse, Petrovitch. Think it over."

"Freda alive! Freda alive!" Petrovitch kept repeating. "My little Freda!" He turned to Noel. "You have saved me from crime. From crime against the law, and against that good woman who still loves me. I thank you."

"That's all right," said Noel, almost overcome by a variety of emotions. To himself he said:

"I'm beginning to like this fellow!"

He got up and held out his hand. Petrovitch also rose.

"Well, I'm afraid I must leave you now. Er . . . about Connie . . . she'll feel this, of course, but I think I can make all the necessary explanations. Will you trust me to break it to her as gently as possible? Naturally, I've said nothing to her about . . . Freda. I didn't feel I could until I'd seen you."

"Thank you. I will leave everything to you. Connie has a great heart, and I think she will not grieve too much if she knows that I but return to an old and faithful love. Soon I go to America to fulfill my engagements, and then——!"

"I understand," said Noel. "Well, good-by!"

"May I ask," inquired Petrovitch, retaining his hand, "how you came to hear that Freda——?"

"Certainly," Noel answered promptly. "You see, years ago, when you and Connie—well—just at that time, my grandmother ran across some one who knew her—knew Freda. Naturally, my grandmother was unhappy about Connie, her daughter, and thought that possibly a divorce—you understand——?"

"Perfectly."

"So she wrote to her."

"Ah! But my wife——"

"Exactly! She wasn't having any. Well, she kept my grandmother's address, and the other day, being anxious and unhappy about you, she naturally thought we might be able to tell her something, and so——"

Petrovitch made a gesture of the hands that showed a perfect comprehension, gratitude, sympathy, a yielding to fate, and a consciousness of his own power over women, wives and others. Noel envied him that gesture.

"My poor little Freda!"

"And that's how it was," Noel concluded. They shook hands again, strongly.

"Well, good luck!" said Noel.

Petrovitch bowed.

They never saw each other again.

In the cab, driving back to Connie's quiet little hotel, Noel wanted to put his head out of the window and shout to the passers-by. He could hardly contain himself.

"Freda," he said aloud, "when I get to Berlin, whether you're alive or dead I'm going to send you the biggest box of chocolates I can buy!"

CHAPTER XXV

At last a day came when Madame Claire received a wire from Paris:

"Arriving London to-night. Feeling very fit. Have engaged rooms McPherson and self Langham Hotel. Will see you to-morrow afternoon about four.

"Stephen."

She thought it was one of the most perfect moments of her life. She could taste to the full, in one mouthful, so to speak, the different yet blending flavors of anticipation and realization. Dawson had never seen her so happily excited, nor so difficult to please in the matter of flowers for her room. Judy had wrought this miracle—had so revived Stephen's flagging spirits that he felt at last able to make the journey. Had they left him alone there in Cannes, he would have waited dully and hopelessly for another stroke. He would probably have ended his days there, without ever returning to England. And now, anything was possible. She longed to share Noel with him, too, Eric, all of them. He might find something to like in Gordon. He might continue to find Connie and Connie's vagaries interesting. They could see each other every day—or nearly every day. And when spring came, he could stay with her in Sussex—he would love her little house and her garden—and they could talk. There was so much to talk about!

She hoped he had made an honest effort to picture her as she now was. Men were so apt not to face the facts of change and decay in the women they loved. Was he still picturing her as she looked when he last saw her, nearly twenty years ago? Or—as is so often the way with age—was he seeing her as she was when he first knew her, before she married Robert? But she felt she could trust to his common sense about that. At any rate, he would see her as he had always seen her, with the eyes of the heart. And what would he be like? She believed that his personality—that indefinable emanation that makes each one of us different from any other one—would be unchanged. To her, nothing else mattered.

* * * * * *

To-morrow came. She pictured Stephen looking out of his windows at London, and getting used to the smell of it again. Madame Claire was always dressed by eleven except on her bad days, and to-day, thank Heaven! was not one of them. From eleven till four—five hours, five long hours! Miss McPherson had telephoned that she would have her patient there by four o'clock. She would leave him at the door, the tactful creature had said, and go for a walk in the park. Madame Claire agreed to this, on the condition that when she came for him again at six, she stay for half an hour. Miss McPherson would be very pleased indeed to do so.

At four, Madame Claire was dressed in a wine-colored silk that spread about her stiffly and richly as she sat in her straight-backed chair. Her white hair was dressed high, and secured with a comb of carved shell. She had given much thought to her appearance. She kept beside her an old ebony stick of Robert's, for her rheumatism made it a little difficult for her to rise. On the other side of the wood fire was another chair, carefully placed so that the light would fall on the face of the occupant, but not too strongly for his comfort. The room was full of flowers; early tulips, richly dyed anemones, and here and there her beloved freesias. On a small table at her right hand lay an inlaid box, and the key to it hung on a bracelet she wore on her wrist.

A bell rang, and she sat motionless, hardly moving her eyelids. Stephen . . . Stephen was at her door . . . fate was kind . . . this was her moment of moments, her day of days.

The door opened, and Dawson said in a strange voice:

"Mr. de Lisle, m'lady," and vanished.

And Stephen came to her. . . .

They brushed each other's cheeks lightly, for the first time in their long lives. They moved the two chairs nearer together and sat with clasped hands. Words for a time were beyond them, but at last Stephen spoke.

"You are wonderful," he said, "wonderful, wonderful!"

"But you——!" cried Madame Claire. "I was prepared for some one much older, some one bent and feeble . . . you are so straight!"

"As long as the Lord lets me walk at all," he told her, "I hope He'll let me walk upright. And I'm better . . . much better."

"How I have longed for this!" Her voice rang out clearly. "My dear, stubborn, too proud old Stephen!"

"Less stubborn now, but still proud. Claire, you always had delightful ways. It's your ways that have always held me—and your wits. But how have you managed to become beautiful?"

"Beautiful? My poor old Stephen—your eyes——!"

"As good as they ever were, except for reading. No, you've got something new . . . what is it? Dignity, that's it. You were always too gentle, too shy, to be properly dignified."

"I was always shy," she agreed, "until lately."

"I adored your shyness. A gentle, soft-voiced thing you were. Clever . . . devilish clever! How you managed Robert! And me. And all the chattering, brilliant, stupid, charming people of our day. You managed 'em all. And nobody knew it, but me. I used to tell Robert he'd have been a government clerk somewhere, but for you."

"That," she said, "was untrue, for Robert had wit and a good brain. His fault was that he didn't understand people. He wasn't human enough. I could help him there."

"And you did help him. You made him; say what you will. You would have made any man."

They talked—how they talked! Never taking their eyes off each other's faces. Remembering things that they had half forgotten, things that it took the two of them together to remember completely. Stopping in their talk every now and then to smile at each other, to realize that this longed-for thing had come to pass. To savor these moments, these perfect, winged moments, that would never be less than perfect; moments that Time had brought to a fine flowering—"Without the end of fruit"—without the end of disillusion, too, and what scent that flowering had! No, there could be no falling off, no dimming of that brightness. They could trust to Death for that. Their curtain would be rung down on a fine gesture, on a perfect note.

And then back to Robert again, and his qualities that Stephen so much admired. They could even talk of him, frankly and simply. Twenty years ago he had been too near, his claim to be regarded as an absent friend, merely, had been too great. But now——

"I think he appreciated you, Claire."

"Yes," she said.

"If he had not—but he did. I have always remembered that. And he made you happy."

She lifted her head and looked squarely at him, holding his eyes with hers, steadily.

"I made myself happy," she said.

"What do you mean?"

There was not much time left to them. Let it be a completely happy time, free of all pretense, of all misunderstanding. She wanted no secrets from Stephen now. Even if she did Robert the least injustice, his spirit must have reached heights of magnanimity very far beyond the reach of such truths as were mere earthly truths. She owed something to the living, and to her own spirit. She had kept her secret well. She meant to permit herself the inestimable luxury of sharing it now with Stephen.

"I mean—I made myself as happy as a woman can be who is not married to the man she loves."

He had felt, when she looked at him so strangely, that he was on the brink of some new knowledge. He almost dreaded what that knowledge might be—dreaded the pain it might bring. He had hardly grasped her meaning yet.

"Claire! Then why—why——? Good God——!"

She released the hand that he had clung to, and unfastened the little gold key that hung from her wrist. She took the inlaid box on her knees and opened it, Stephen watching her every movement. The box was lined with red velvet and contained a single letter, yellow with age. She took it out, delicately, and turned it over in her fingers so that he saw both sides of it. It was unopened. The heavy seal on the flap of the envelope was unbroken. She gave him the letter without a word.

He studied it for a moment.

"My writing!" he exclaimed. "Claire, what is this? What letter is this?"

"That letter," she said gently, putting a hand on his arm, "is a proposal from the man I loved."

He looked at her, uncomprehending.

"I will tell you about it," she said.

"Fifty-six years ago, Stephen, when that letter was written, I had two admirers. Oh, more, perhaps, but only two that counted. They were you and Robert. Robert was serious and clever, and very much in love with himself, and you were—everything that the heart of a girl like me could desire. You were friends, you two; you were rivals, but friends for all that. You were the better lover, Robert the more ingenious wooer. Robert out-maneuvered you. It was he who got most of my dances at balls, but it was always you I longed to give them to. It was Robert who won the approval of my mother and father; it was you who won mine. He was said to be a coming young man. They told me that you lacked ambition and force—even in those days people talked about force—but it was you I loved. You told my father that you wanted to marry me, and he said you were too young for me. You were only twenty-two, and I was twenty-three. He persuaded you to make the Grand Tour before settling anything. You told him you would not go without speaking to me. And you tried to speak to me—how often you tried!—but we were never left alone in those days. My mother was fearful, for Robert, and Robert was fearful for himself. So there were always interruptions. You were almost maddened by them, and I—I was eating my heart out. If you could only have passed me on the stairs and whispered, 'Marry me!' I would have said 'Yes.' But the chance never came. And I—little fool—was too shy to make it. And then, on the very eve of your Grand Tour, you wrote me this letter.

"I had almost despaired of your ever speaking. I was hurt and miserable. Robert redoubled his efforts. And then one day he came to the house—it was the day he meant to propose, and I knew that my mother meant to receive him with me and then excuse herself, leaving us together. It was the day before you were to go away, and I longed for any word or sign from you.

"You sent this letter, by hand. It reached the house at the same moment that Robert did. He saw that it was from you, and he guessed, and was jealous and afraid. He told the maid that he would give it to me upstairs, and that as I was expecting him she needn't announce him. Stephen—he put the letter in his pocket."

Stephen made a sudden movement and leaned nearer to her.

"Go on," he said in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper.

"He kept it in his pocket. Yes, Robert did that. I, hearing nothing, thought you indifferent, and my heart seemed to break. He proposed to me that afternoon, and the next evening, knowing that you had indeed gone without a word, I gave him the answer he wanted."

She paused a moment, looking into the fire.

"I wrote to you to tell you of my engagement. You must have considered that the letter I wrote to you then was in answer to the one you had sent me. You thought that Robert had won fairly, and blamed yourself. When you came back, Robert and I were already married, and you resumed your friendship with him and with me. And I pretended—how well I pretended you know—that you were no more to me than my husband's friend. And you were the soul of honor, Stephen, for although I knew you still loved me—I knew it the moment I saw you again—never by one word or look did you try to show me that you did.

"As I look back now, it seems to me that I saw almost as much of you as I did of Robert. We were always together, we three. I used to try to marry you to my friends, but although you were always charming to them, you were never more than that.

"And then, years later, Robert was made ambassador to Italy. It was a tremendous step up, and you rejoiced with us, as you always did at our good fortune. The first year we were in Rome, Robert was very ill with fever. He thought he was going to die. He was always apt to exaggerate his illnesses. He told me he had something on his mind, and he gave me your letter, and told me what he had done. I forgave him, I had to forgive him, and we never spoke of it again. But I never dared to read it, Stephen. I put it away in this box. I didn't dare to open that wound."

There was silence again. Stephen felt he could say nothing. Robert had been his closest friend—they had been like brothers—and he had done this! What was there for him to say?

"I am telling you this now," Madame Claire went on, "because I want the time that remains to us to be as perfect as possible. I want you to know that while I was a good and faithful wife to Robert, and made him, I believe, very happy, I loved you. I bear him no ill will. He acted according to his lights, believing, then, that all was fair in love. That doesn't make his act less detestable, but I must weigh in the scales against that, the fact that he was the best of husbands and fathers. And I forgave him absolutely. But, oh, Stephen——! All those years . . . all those years were one long struggle against my love for you!"

There are moments too great or too poignant for speech. He did not know, then, whether the pain or the happiness of this new knowledge was the stronger. For a moment the pain had the upper hand.

"It is a tragedy!" he said at last. "A tragedy!"

Presently he turned to her again.

"But when he died?" he asked. "When I came to you again? Why did you say no?"

Madame Claire hesitated before she spoke.

"My reasons," she said, "may have seemed to you to be poor ones. I pleaded my age, I remember, and the fact—or what I believed was a fact—that it would have been an elderly folly for us to have married then. But there was another reason, and a better one. Stephen . . . I dreaded an anti-climax. And it would have been that. After loving you all my life, all my youth, to have married you at sixty . . . it seemed to me a desecration. I hoped for a dear friendship with you. It was that I longed for. But you were angry and hurt. You left me. I thought you would be gone six months, or possibly a year. You were away nearly twenty years! . . . Oh, Stephen! . . ."

His eyes begged her forgiveness.

"I always tried to think that you were right, Claire," he said softly. "Right or wrong, it all belongs to the past now. So does my loneliness. I have been lonely, but I can bear that too, now that I know I have been loved. That sheds a glory on my life . . . a glory."

His voice sank. She watched him turning the letter over in his hands, remembering . . . remembering. Then, with a gesture full of courtliness and charm, he held it out to her.

"Read it, my dear, now," he said. "Veux tu, toi?"

CHAPTER XXVI

Late September had come, with its sad, too-mellow beauty. It had ripened all the fruit, burnishing the apples to look like little suns, and the sun to look like a ripe, burnished apple. It had woven its web of blue over all the still countryside, so that the elms standing so nobly in the Sussex meadows seemed draped in it, like tapestry trees; the far hills had wrapped themselves in its hazy folds and gone to sleep until some cold and later wind should strip them of it.

In Madame Claire's garden a few roses bloomed somewhat blowsily, and asters and Michaelmas daisies, dahlias and a brave company of late-staying perennials made welcome color notes among the greens and rust browns.

She sat in her library, writing. Every now and then she looked out of her French window at Stephen who was sitting on the lawn in one of the garden chairs, reading, his long legs resting on another. Robins visited him, perching on a chair or table, and he thought as his sunken blue eyes regarded them humorously, that the robin was more like a confiding little animal than a bird, with its friendly ways, and its power—shared with no other small bird—of meeting the human eye.

He had lived in some of the beauty spots of the world, but he said to himself that no beauty crept into the heart as this beauty of Sussex did. Mingled with it was some of the charm of what was lovable in human nature—the charm of gentleness and quiet and homeliness. Every wind was tempered, the sun shone through a protecting haze, the verdure harbored nothing more treacherous than a fluttering moth. To an eye accustomed to the white and blue glare of the South, every tint, every color seemed happily blended. And even the robins, he thought, returning to his book, seemed to know and like him.

Madame Claire was writing to Noel.

"I have often pointed out to you," she wrote, *"the enormous advantages of old age over youth, but I have never felt them more keenly myself than now. The world is at present in a state of flux, and that state, while it may be beneficial, is rarely comfortable. There are movements afoot that I am sure cause young mothers to wonder fearfully what precarious and troubled lives are*

in store for their little ones. I am not one of those who believe blindly that all new movements are good ones. The world has seen many that seemed great, happily defeat their own ends, leaving the generations to come a legacy of knowledge that they seem, often enough, to ignore. I believe that the struggle will be fierce, but the world, in order to attend to the enormously important businesses of increasing, eating and sleeping, requires in the long run certain conventions and conformities, and to preserve these has a way of weakening the ground under the feet of the shouting and bloodthirsty reformer—even, alas! of the true spiritual leader. The world has dedicated itself, I think, to the great law of average—such an eternal warring of good and bad would seem to bring that about naturally—and compromise would be the inevitable end of every struggle.

"You, and all those I love, will either be participators in or spectators of that struggle. Not so Stephen and myself. We are privileged by old age to ignore it if we can. Age has a right to forget the evils that it can do nothing to lessen.

"I still read my paper, but I get no pleasure from it. Who does? One sees that the Empire for which one would cheerfully die, is accused of making mistakes in every quarter of the globe.

One hears of millions of helpless people in another country brought to starvation through a fiendish conspiracy of greed unexampled in the world's cruel history. It is one long tale of dissatisfaction and dissent, and it were better not to have turned a single page.

"But let us leave all that and talk of people.

"When you came back for Judy's wedding in June, Eric and Louise were still living apart, though they came together of necessity on that occasion; and things looked hopeless. But Eric, as I suppose you must have heard by now, had a breakdown brought on from overwork. He had made, I think, a hundred and forty speeches in eight months, and traveled I forget how many thousand miles. His fight with the I.L.P. over the Moorgate Division was a great fight and he defeated them all along the line. But the strain was too much for him. Louise was at Mistley when he was taken ill, and Connie was still keeping house for him. She hurried him off to a nursing home, and wrote Louise a scathing letter which brought that lady hot-foot to London. The two met for the first time over the sickbed, and oddly enough, neither dislikes the other as much as they had expected to. Connie had given such a bad account of Eric that I believe Louise came to get

a deathbed forgiveness. At any rate, she completely broke down and sobbed out her remorse on his pillow, while Connie and the nurse stood in the hall and tried not to hear. Eric accepted her repentance and forgave her on the sole condition that she maintain that same friendly attitude when he was well again. That, and that alone he insisted upon, that she treat him like a friend instead of an enemy. This she gave him to understand she would do, and they are now convalescing together—for in a sense Louise must be convalescing too—in Chip's cottage in Cornwall, looked after by an old Cornish woman. I had a letter from her yesterday, and she says she has never been so happy in her life. That is because she has him entirely to herself, and there is no one there who could possibly interest him more than she does. So far so good. What will happen when he is at work again, surrounded by people who make claims upon him, I do not know. But I do feel certain that things can never be as bad again.

"Connie of course is merely marking time till your return. She has lately made a number of perfectly desirable acquaintances, however, and is not in the least unhappy. I think her thankfulness at her narrow escape from a bigamous

(?) marriage keeps her from cavilling at her fate, or from dwelling on her inexplicable infatuation for Petrovitch, who is in America. For she is not cured of that, nor will she ever be. He is, as you once said, her hero for life, spots and all. That is the rôle she has chosen for herself, and she will play it to the end. I am longing to know whether or not you have been able to find any traces of Freda. I sometimes feel that you and I played a not altogether worthy part in that affair, but it was worth it!

"You ask me for minute particulars concerning Judy. Is she happy, you ask? What am I to say to that? If she is not happy, she will always be too loyal to say so. I think she is clever enough to make her own happiness, or at least to attain to an average of contentment—an average that leans at moments toward the peaks of happiness on one side and toward the abyss of unhappiness on the other. And I think it is good for us to look both ways. Her love for Chip—and a very real love it is—has much in it of the maternal, a quality I think every woman's love is the better for. As for him—dear, simple Chip!—he worships her, and is unutterably happy. He may disappoint her in some ways. He lacks and will always lack—in spite of the miracle of her love—

self-confidence. He is never quite comfortable with strangers, and never expects to be liked, though when he finds that he is, he glows like a nice child that is justly praised. If fame ever comes to Chip it will come in spite of him.

"Judy has made their small flat a really delightful place, but entertaining, except in the most informal way, is of course impossible. No one thinks less of human pomps than I do, but given different opportunities, Judy might have been something of a Mademoiselle de Lespinasse. Her charm is extraordinary. She has 'come out' wonderfully since her marriage, and it is easy to see that she will develop into an uncommon woman. If Chip will only develop with her—but I pray that he will.

"That little cottage in Cornwall that played such an important part in their lives was the right setting for their honeymoon, for they had much to learn about each other. You say that however it turns out, you are bound to feel partly responsible. Possibly; but that lovable and gentle face of Chip's with the lights shining through the fog upon it, was far more responsible. Judy was bound to love him. And whether she be happy or not, she will be all the better for loving him. We make too much of happiness, Noel. It doesn't

much matter what our lives are; but it does matter whether or not we live them finely. And that is possible to any of us. A certain style is necessary for this; a certain gallant attitude. One finds this style, this gallantry, in the most unlooked-for places sometimes——

"And just now, I think, is the right moment for me to speak of Mr. Colebridge. In spite of his undeniable limitations he loved Judy sincerely, and he has proved it in a most agreeable way. You remember I wrote you some time ago that I had been reading Chip's plays. There were three, and two of them are charming—really charming. I imagine Chip's knowledge of women to have been extremely slight, but the ladies who existed in his imagination are really the most delightful creatures! Delightful! These two plays that I like so much are fanciful, but at the same time they are wonderfully sympathetic and human, and I feel absolutely certain that given half a chance they are bound to succeed. I at once gave them to Mr. Colebridge to read—he owns theaters, you know—and although he says he knows nothing about plays, I mistrust him, for he knew enough to appreciate these. He is taking them to New York with him soon, and launched and extensively advertised by him, I feel sure they will

flourish. He seems to know the very actors and actresses for the leading parts. Isn't it lucky? Mr. Colebridge seems almost as pleased about it as I am myself. Judy says he is doing it for me, but of course that's nonsense. He says he has no doubt that the plays will put Judy and Chip 'on Easy Street.'

"Now that I call gallant. To make your rival's fortune is not the end and aim of most disappointed lovers. There is style about that. I like Mr. Colebridge. He comes here quite often to see Stephen and me, and while I admit that I like him and—yes—even admire him, I do not, I confess, like him best when he is sitting in my garden, oblivious to its beauties and to the cajoleries of a most divine autumn, talking about sugar stocks. I like him better when he has gone, and I think how good-natured it was of him to have come, and how nice he really is.

"Chip's book on religions is in the hands of the publishers at last. I haven't read it. Neither has Judy. He is extraordinarily shy and sensitive about it, and Judy says she has twice saved it from destruction at his hands. I feel it must be good. It may even be great! Well, we shall know some day.

"There's very little about Gordon that I can

find to say. I know that he had set his heart on a house in Mayfair, and that Helen had decided on one in Bloomsbury, near certain friends of hers; Bloomsbury, as you know, having become the fashion with a set of people whom Helen considers very desirable. I guessed what that high nose and long, unbeautiful chin indicated. Millie and John tactfully sided with both, for they feel that while Gordon is of course perfect, Helen can do no wrong. The little comedy has amused me considerably, and——"

Stephen was calling to her. She put down her pen and stepped out of the French window. She crossed the lawn with a pleasant rustle of long gray skirts, and he got out of his chair as she came toward him.

"What have you been doing all this long time?"

"Writing to Noel," she answered. "Have I neglected you?"

"I was beginning to think so. Come and take a walk round the garden with me."

"Where is Miss McPherson?"

"She's perpetrating one of her atrocious and painstaking water colors in the lane."

"And you tell her they are beautiful!"

"It's the only way I can make her blush."

They walked between herbaceous borders where dying colors burned with the deep, concentrated brilliance of embers.

"I have never loved an autumn as I have loved this one," Stephen said.

"Nor I. Do you know why that is, Stephen? It's because we are untroubled by thoughts of other autumns."

"Perhaps. I don't mind your saying those things as I once did."

"All the fever," she went on, "has gone out of life. Each day is a little book of hours. The opening and closing of each flower is an event of prime and beautiful importance. The shape and movement of clouds, the flight of birds, the shadows of the leaves on the grass—all those things and a thousand other lovely things are beginning to assume a right proportion in our lives. We are beginning to be happy."

"It's the wonderful peace of it all," said Stephen.

"Yes. The peace of old age is something I have looked forward to all my life. That, and the dignity of it." She looked up at him, smiling. "For old age, Stephen, my dear, is almost as dignified as death."

(10)

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